



Play Pretend by thepsychodelicate

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Summary: She was completely still, when he licked a single tear off her cheek. "If only I could spare you... If only there was anyone, who could save you..." He was mocking her. Making fun of how weak she really was. But for a brief second she saw a painful flicker in his bloodthirsty eyes. She knew there was a kind of well-covered powerlessness in him. Or maybe it was just her imagination.

1. Chapter 1

Chapter 1: A Nice Girl

It was weak. Very weak. In fact, when It's inhuman eyes gleamed among the darkness underneath the streets of Derry as the evil entity had awakened yet again, It felt numb. Beaten-up. Famished.

And all that was a result of It's last encounter with the Lucky Seven, also known as the Losers Club. The fearlessness of those kids has drained Pennywise and every other creature It could become off of its powers and left it crawling on the ground beneath their feet. And so the Losers believed they defeated the monster... But It lived, and despite all the damage It took, the undying hunger for human fear and flesh was still there.

Only this time It would have to approach Its first victim differently. Because It's powers were limited, a more devious act was required... Perhaps similar to the one which deprived little poor Georgie of his arm.

And the perfect opportunity was just ahead...

She was sitting on the Kissing Bridge, legs dandling over the metal barrier, hands on both her sides steadying her posture, and she was all alone. The only sound around her was of the water stream below. The water level was very low here recently, so the river could be easily crossed.

Spring has just begun and the lazy afternoon sun was lightening her delicate, sad face. Probably everyone in Derry was currently having fun at the annual festival, made to celebrate the day Derry has officially become a town. A lot's changed since then, but this tradition didn't.

On her way here she saw a group of her 'friends' hanging out. They were laughing and throwing popcorn at each other. The multi-flavoured popcorn, which has become the festival's specialty. You

could buy almost any taste you like; sweet, salty, spicy, caramel... even vanilla, which was her personal favorite.

With eyes closed, the girl couldn't help but wonder why was she sitting there, abandoned by all while her classmates were having fun on their own.

She sighed. Things couldn't possibly get any worse, could they?

And then she felt it. The sweet smell of... cotton candy? Yes, it did seem like it but wherever it came from, there was just something wrong about it. The scent wasn't just sweet but much more intense, as if it consisted of joy itself.

Her eyes snapped open, and she saw a big, red balloon, attached to a long white string, floating just before her face. Her mouth gave a little gasp of surprise but what startled her the most was the person holding it.

A tall stranger observed her from below with a stare as piercing as the nib of a blade, his shoes and ankles soaked, his hand outstretched towards her, offering her the blood-red balloon. He was standing there, in the middle of the river, completely motionless and if not the casualness of his clothes, the shocked girl would think it looked almost sinister.

How did he get there? Wouldn't she hear him getting near? He couldn't just appear there out of thin air, right?

Suddenly, the man's sharp features softened, and he tilted his head as his mouth curled into what was probably the widest smile she's ever seen. And when his bright, green eyes glanced over her just as if they weren't throwing daggers at her barely seconds ago, she began to notice how gorgeous he really was.

He surely was older than her, probably in his twenties, his perfectly shaped body so tall he could reach her if he would come only a few steps closer...

The girl loosened her shoulders a bit. She realized her whole body had gone completely stiff.

"What are you doing down there?" She asked still slightly unsure.

"Isn't it obvious?" The tone of his voice seemed quite amused, but she could only think of how it made her hands quiver on the metal bars. "I'm offering you a balloon."

"Why?" Her eyes narrowed on his figure suspiciously. This was a strange situation after all...

"You look like a nice girl. A nice girl... sitting here all alone... I thought I could cheer you up." That big, warm smile never left the stranger's lips, and she did really want to believe him. She wanted nothing more at the moment.

"But I don't even know you." The doubts filled her head. *This can be just a joke. A silly prank someone wants to pull on you, nothing more. People don't just walk around and give balloons to strangers.* She thought to herself. *No one has ever approached you this way before. No one. Then why would he? What's in it for him?*

"Oh how rude of me not to introduce myself!" He exclaimed in a rather theatrical way. "Do forgive me, I'm Robert. Robert Gray." His actions were so over-the-top, but it made her smile. "Aand you are..?"

"Madeline." She said with a hint of joy in her eyes.

"Madeline." Robert repeated, distinguishing the last syllable almost inaudibly. The smile became a slightly mocking, one-sided grin. "Now won't you be a nice girl and just... take it." The man waved the floating thing suggestively in front of her once more.

Madeline's small hand reached for the string but hesitated halfway. She had a bad feeling about this. But at the same time, what harm could come out of it? It was just a balloon.

"Come on." A light laugh escaped Robert's mouth. "Take it."

He wanted it to look like a casual gesture but his every move had a dark, violent undertone and had she acknowledged it, had she seen 'his' true form, she'd be running away from him in fright. But Madeline couldn't see the creature hiding under this unbelievably captivating glamour.

She took it.

The girl held the string delicately and then gave Robert a shy smile.

"So..." He began, intentionally locking his eyes with hers as he took one step towards the bridge, then another one. "Everyone is at the festival. Aren't you going?"

"Nah. Not this time I guess."

"That's good. There are many other fun things to do around here, you know." His voice sounded somewhat huskier, almost a whisper. A weird feeling crept up Madeline's spine like electricity. She wasn't able to break the eye contact with her interlocutor. And he was getting closer.

"Like what?" The question came out sounding like a squeal. She cleared her throat. It suddenly felt hard to swallow.

Robert said nothing. The only answer she got was the devious flicker in his eyes, and in that moment she was almost sure she saw a glint of yellow in them.

Lost in his hypnotizing gaze, the girl didn't notice as his hand rested on the metal bar just above her ankle. She should go. Right now. Run as far away from the man standing below her as she could. The only problem was...

Madeline just wasn't. Able. To. Move.

He'd made his way to her slowly, like a predator trying not to startle its prey.

In the distance, the sun began to set, reflecting inside the balloon floating above It and the girl, which made the color even more lively. Soon enough the sky would be lightened up with red, long smudges.

It would take only one abrupt pull. A couple of seconds. He would drag her down in the twinkling of an eye, and then the water could become red as well. And It would make her float. Her or the remains of her.

Now that Madeline knew something wasn't right and the feeling of unease and fear began to rise in her, It knew that was just a glimpse of the pure terror It could make her feel.

And just what she was feeling right now was more than enough to almost make Robert Gray forget himself. It had to use all its willpower not to tear her apart right then and there.

His long fingers wandered up, caressing her skin as his hand slowly closed around the girl's leg in a light grip. Madeline was caught in a confusing, half-conscious state; her heart was pounding uncontrollably, she knew something bad was about to happen, she was aware of Robert's touch as well as of the goosebumps all over her body, but the only thing she could see was the greenness of his irises and the bottomless, dark hole of his pupils, in which she'd been hopelessly trapped. She couldn't control it.

She couldn't do anything.

Anything but just what he wanted her to.

And then a loud, sudden sound filled the air. But it wasn't a scream. The red balloon popped.

The hypnotizing daze was gone as quickly as the balloon and Madeline collapsed backwards, releasing herself from It's grasp. Her elbows rubbed roughly against the ground before her back hit the asphalt with a loud thud. Everything went silent for a while but just mere seconds after the unexpected 'pop' a cheerful voice called from the distance.

"Boom! Headshot." Then a series of giggles.

Madeline picked herself up, wincing in pain, fresh blood covering the grazes on her forearms. She had to wipe her eyes to fully regain her vision, and then she quickly looked around.

It was a child. A little boy, now running down the road, still laughing, with a small, plastic pistol in his hand. He must've bought it at the festival. She thought. He just wanted to try his new toy out...

Still a little dizzy, the girl crawled back to the barrier and peeked

over the edge of the bridge. He was gone.

Now there were only the red remains of the balloon, floating in the water like spilled blood. It could've been blood.

Madeline sighed deeply in relief and when she finally walked away moments later, the white string was still coiled around her fingers.

A/N: Hi everyone! This is my very first attempt on writing a fanfic so please review kindly ^.^ Also, English is not my native language, therefore I am sorry for any spellings or grammar mistakes.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2: Into the Night

Her room was dark and quiet. The alarm clock on her nightstand showed half an hour till midnight and everyone at home should be asleep by now. However, Madeline wasn't. No matter how hard she tried to lay peacefully and simply give in to the tiredness she felt, the sleep just wouldn't come.

Too many thoughts were now swirling in her head. After the incident on the Kissing Bridge she went straight home and during the whole evening she's been trying not to think about it. But now that she couldn't escape her thoughts, the mysterious man's words kept resounding in her mind. She's never seen him around here before, so he probably wasn't from Derry. And if not, what has brought him here? The festival? Maybe. But then why was he under the bridge instead of the town center?

'There are many other fun things to do around here...'

Madeline could visualize his lips moving just as they did while he was pronouncing those words but it all seemed so surreal to her now. Was he even truly there? He disappeared so quickly... She touched the deep scratches on her elbows. They were the only visible proof that the conversation between her and Robert really happened. The scratches and the white string, which now rested at the bottom of one of her drawers.

What would've happened if the balloon didn't pop? Would his eyes just swallow her up whole?

Suddenly Madeline felt a desperate urge to get out, get out and go... somewhere. Anywhere but her small, darkened room, otherwise her head would explode from all those unanswered questions.

She quickly put on something suitable enough and crept out of her room, then quietly made her way down the hall and to the front door. The wooden floor creaked lightly under her every step. *No one*

will notice. She thought. I won't be gone for long.

She opened the door and stepped outside where the cool night air enveloped her. It already felt better. But where was she supposed to go now?

'Everyone is at the festival. Aren't you going?'

Now she knew where she wanted to be.

She *was* going.

Her room was dark and quiet. Only the ticking of the clock broke the silence. She wasn't there, breathing heavily in her sleep. Madeline wasn't there at all when It came for her.

Once It felt the sweetness of her fear, It knew It will have her no matter what. And if not that damned kid, the girl would be already under Its power...

That stupid, insolent brat and his toy! One could hardly imagine the rage It was feeling towards the boy.

He would be next.

The small room was filled with her scent. She smelled of sunshine, of hope, of... youth. And for a brief moment It began to wonder why would such a pretty little thing be as sad as she was when It found her. But no, that thought had quickly vanished before Its murderous instincts took control again.

Now or never. It will have her this very night and nothing would stop It. Nothing.

The creature followed Madeline's fading scent out of the house and into the night.

The empty streets seemed desolated and dead, as if no one has ever inhabited the town. There was no wind and the full moon hung bright and lonely in the pitch-black sky, which only made the

surrounding stillness the more evident... But she liked it. Madeline felt safe in the silence. No one could judge, no one could point fingers, no one could make stupid jokes at her.

She could hardly ever feel that way since one of her closest friends has spilled certain facts about Madeline's mother to probably everyone. And that was a long time ago.

Funny, right? To bully someone because of their parents' choices.

But this night could be different. She wanted to do something exciting, have some fun.

Just a few turns separated the girl from the park, in which all the festival's attractions were placed. Each year, the biggest park in Derry was turned into a local theme park with all the fun slots and rides. The workers were supposed to remove the structures and settings tomorrow, so she had more than enough time left.

Madeline didn't hurry. She was taking her time and observing all the surroundings like if she was thrown into some otherworldly place and everything was just fine...

That is, until she noticed a couple of unfriendly shadows, dimly lightened by the smoke from their cigarettes.

"Hey!" One of them called. "Hey you! Yes, you, girly!"

She clenched her jaws and fought the urge to look back at them. *They can't be talking about me.* She thought, but then realized that, of course, the streets were completely empty.

"Oh shit, isn't that Maddie?" She heard another voice and this one seemed familiar.

"Yeah, I think it is. Maddie! Where are ya going, Maddie?"

Madeline speeded up her pace immediately. That voice she knew all too well. It was Dave.

"Oh, come on! Is that how you say 'hi' to your *friends*?" It didn't take much effort to guess that they weren't sober. *Maybe if I just ignore*

them, they'll leave me alone. Please, let them just leave me alone...

"Ah, don't be like that, Maddie! We don't bite... hard." She heard Dave call after her again and as she was getting further and further from the group, their laughs echoed behind her back. Luckily, they weren't following her. Or so she thought.

It was hard to believe that Madeline and David were close to each other once. Just a few years ago she considered him one of her dearest friends. But when they started getting too close, she rejected him and so the fight between them began. Well, it wasn't technically 'a fight', since it was only Dave who was being aggressive towards Madeline.

Her pulse hadn't eased out until she saw the high fence surrounding the park ahead. Finally. All was quiet again, and she kept on walking until she stood directly in front of the gateway. Obviously, it was closed, but getting in wasn't a problem for someone as frail as Madeline. There was just enough space between the closed entrance and one of the rails for the girl to get through. First her head, then shoulders, then chest (she had to hold her breath) and after a moment she found herself on the other side.

While swiftly straightening her clothes, she glanced around with wide eyes.

Oh wow, they did really do their best at preparing the festival this year. Before her, a whole new world consisting of many colorful tents, carousels, fun slots and many hidden paths stood unveiled and ready to explore. There were stalls with popcorn and cotton candy machines standing all over the place and a lot of dappled decorations were hung in between tree trunks.

Madeline imagined how wonderful it must've looked during the day, with dozens of children running around. The joyful sound of their laughter resounded in her head, and she could almost hear the enchanting melody somewhat muffled by all the noise;

"Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St. Clement's

You owe me five farthings, say the bells of St. Martin's..."

She was sure she has already heard it before.

"When will you pay me? Say the bells of Old Bailey..."

But it was only her imagination. The melody grew distant, as if it was carried away by the wind and Madeline was brought back to reality. The hollow theme park, lightened softly by moonlight welcomed her and the girl smiled in excitement.

He gazed dully at the cigarette in his hand. It's only been a couple of minutes since he told his buddies he's finished messing around for the evening. That was a lie in which they didn't believe but none of them had the courage to question his words. And where did he go? Firstly, he went for another drink. At the age of seventeen, he's already been on rehab twice and it brought no effect whatsoever. The remains of a shattered bottle were still sprawled somewhere on the ground. (But it wasn't always like this, was it?)

Then, he followed her of course. The bitter taste of alcohol on his lips wasn't even close to the bitterness in his heart. What was she even doing outside at this hour? To his knowledge, she never left home after it got dark.

He chuckled under his breath. If only the ones, who were spreading those nasty rumors about her knew what a good girl she really was...

And how did 'he' know that? Well, David knew many things about her. Maybe even more than he should. More than several times he's been circling her house at night, wanting to do something, anything to show her that one didn't just get away with turning him down like that. It was not even about her anymore. But he just wasn't determined enough then.

And yet tonight he felt he couldn't keep it going any longer.

She didn't even look back at him. She didn't take the time to turn her head, but completely ignored him. Ignored him!

David let his anger and the alcohol burning in his veins lead him. And it led him towards the park in the town center.

Madeline's bright eyes peeked through a heavy curtain. At first, she got very confused but then, as she realized what she was looking at, the corners of her mouth curled up. A maze of distorting mirrors! The girl got inside the tent without hesitation.

The inside of the tent was as dark as a tomb, so she began to search for a light source, even though she could barely see a thing. No wonder, she didn't notice a tall figure lurking within the darkness. In fact, she was perfectly calm, clueless even, and after a while her fingers scumbled across a cable and then a switch. She pressed it and an incredibly long line of electric lights illuminated the twisted paths inside the maze and before she knew it, a lot of her own, grotesque reflections surrounded her.

Madeline went in deeper and deeper, gazing enthusiastically in every possible direction, to see which version of herself was the most bizarre. The mirrors showed her as unbelievably tall or ridiculously short, with a giraffe neck or hips three times their size, but when she saw herself with a gigantic head, she just couldn't hold a laugh.

And as she laughed, the lights flickered.

Her laugh abruptly stopped, caught in her throat as her eyes went wide cautiously.

Which one was the way out? She should find it just in case something bad happened...

Suddenly, a hasty rustle could be heard, and she caught a quick movement to her right. Or was it just the mirror?

Madeline spun around hopelessly, not knowing where to look or where to hide. But what was she hiding from? Did anyone see her getting in the tent?

Panic started to rise in her. Crap! She shouldn't have turned on the lights in the first place.

And just as the thought crossed her mind, the lights flickered once more and then went completely off.

The girl just stood there, in the middle of the maze, frozen in fear,

waiting for what was to come. She did not make a single move, but focused on her hearing, hoping she'd stay unnoticed.

Time was passing painfully slow. Madeline was counting the seconds and wondering how many were yet to pass until the danger is gone, when at last her ears registered a repetitive sound.

Footsteps. They were footsteps.

Now she could really start to panic. Whoever was there, was definitely getting at her, so she had to think of something. A way to get out of this mess. The heart in her chest was pounding desperately loud, and she just couldn't think clearly. The footsteps were getting close way too fast. It seemed that the person knew exactly the way...

Madeline had no other choice. She ran. But what she didn't realize was that instead running away from the danger, she ran straightly towards it.

Her body hit against something big and firm, and she would've fallen to the ground had someone's strong hand not caught her by the wrist. It was then she saw a pair of bright eyes staring back at her.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3: Do Me a Favor

Madeline felt as if all the air had been sucked from her lungs. She gaped at the man in front of her in pure shock.

"What the hell?!" She managed to shriek at last, letting all her mixed emotions out.

Robert just looked at her. It was like their positions switched. Now she had to look up to meet his eyes, and he was the one to watch her from above.

The girl thought she'd never meet him again but there he was, towering over her in all his glory. Somehow, the darkness suited him. He was like a shadow, like someone who just didn't fit into her world and yet... Though she was very unsure of his intentions, deep down inside she wanted him to be in her world. Madeline didn't back away, didn't just push him aside as she should've, but sighed in relief. She was actually happy to see him again.

"Robert! You scared me to death..." Her voice was still a bit shaky. Satisfaction lustered in his face.

"Oh, did I?" He examined her from head to toe, as if checking if she was truly so afraid but then shook his head in a mock of disapproval. "I don't think so." He said, lowering his head slightly. "But I wish I did."

A chill ran through her skin. Gosh, she hated the way almost anything he did make her feel. Madeline moved away slightly, gaining back her personal space.

His hand was still gripping the girl's wrist. She eyed it suggestively but Robert didn't seem to bother.

"You can let go of me now..." She breathed out and he listened.

There was a moment of awkward silence between them. Madeline

needed to collect her thoughts.

"W-what are you doing here anyway?" She asked with a frown. "Did you follow me?"

He cocked his head and hesitated before saying anything.

"Let's just say... You're not the only one who wants to have some fun tonight, Madeline." Robert smiled slyly, as the words left his lips. He was quite amused with the girl's puzzled expression. "Come. Let's get out of here." He started leading the way out, and she went with him. Of course, she did.

They were both wandering around the park in silence, a weird couple. A bright-eyed girl and a monster, hidden under his human skin. Why did he put it on again? Why was she still alive? Moments ago he had her trapped inside of a darkened maze, she was defenseless and terrified and he decided not to hurt her.

Sure, her fear made It quiver with hunger mixed with the most bizarre kind of pleasure but it just didn't feel... right. Maybe it wasn't just enough. Maybe It had to play pretend a while more. The bigger the scare, the better the meal.

But the girl already seemed perfect. The way her soft skin almost glistened lit by moonlight, how the chilly wind brushed her hair, her every breath made him want to press her tight against him and taste her every emotion. What a huge amount of self-control it required not to expose those needs.

"You're not from here, are you? I mean, I've never seen you around." Madeline asked suddenly and looked at Robert with curiosity.

His answer could've been a lie. But it wasn't.

"I show up here once in a while... Though my absence usually takes a long time, I do belong in Derry. You can trust me on that."

His absence took a long time indeed. Exactly 27 years. And last time he'd 'showed up' she wasn't even born yet.

"Does your family live here?" She was so clueless. So hopelessly

clueless he even found it kind of funny. Curious little thing.

"No." He stated dryly.

Madeline's brows furrowed. She clearly did not understand, because how could she? And then something unusual happened. Robert Gray laughed. IT laughed. And it wasn't a mocking laugh or a maniacal, high-pitched psychopathic laugh. Not the one It'd pull at one of its victims.

"What? What's so funny?" The girl asked, slight embarrassment hiding somewhere in her features. "What have I said?"

"Do me a favor and stop asking questions, Madeline."

"Why? What, are you some kind of a criminal, who just happened to choose Derry as a hideout?" It was just an innocent joke, but Madeline did consider the possibility.

"That was another question." He chuckled darkly.

"You can't get to know someone without asking questions."

"You wouldn't want to know me." Robert's tone was low and cold. He looked down at her and his eyes were just as cold as the words. Just like when she saw them for the first time. And the girl answered them with a bold gaze.

"But I do."

Then you're asking for trouble, little one. Now that was interesting. Maybe he could use that. His eyes left hers and wandered up, stopping on the turned off neon sign 'CRACK OF DOOM'. A dark ride.

"Hmm..." He smiled slowly in thought. "If you really are so brave, prove it."

Madeline spun around to see a small building with an overly big entrance, door of irregular shape and cracked windows. The cheap spray resembling dirt and dust on the fake, wooden pillars. The festival has never had a scary ride before...

"Oh no! No. There's no way I'm going in there after all that's happened today." She stared at him in disbelief. Did he really want them to go in *there*? When they were all alone here? The ride wasn't even working at this hour!

"That's too bad. And here I thought you wanted to get to know me." He started to turn away, as if he wasn't interested in keeping up the conversation anymore and didn't have to wait long before she said;

"Wait!" That always worked. "Ok, I'll go but..." She bit her lip nervously and gazed around, searching for a way to at least delay fulfilling the promise.

And there it was. A great, old-fashioned carousel.

"...but you'll have to give me a ride on that first."

"That?" The carousel awaited them almost begging to be used. Its seats were carved as horses and the many fancy ornaments gave it a fairy-tale like sense of charm. *Why not?* Thought Robert. *Let the girl have some fun before her own 'crack of doom'.*

"Deal." He agreed. Madeline gave him a bright smile and started practically dragging him towards the thing.

They found the control panel, which wasn't very difficult to handle and somehow, as in the distorting mirrors maze, the power was still on. Not caring if turning the device on would draw any attention, Robert pulled the main lever.

Suddenly, the whole carousel lit up, almost as bright and colorful as a Christmas tree. It cast dimmed, golden shadows at all the surroundings along with Madeline's delighted face. It was wonderful. Before she could examine it properly, her legs carried her straight towards the horse-like seats. Wanting to choose the most special one, she started checking each one. In that moment she kind of forgot herself and started to behave like a child again. And he observed her advertently.

She was just like a kid in a candy store, such a small thing could give her so much happiness. When she finally settled down on one of the

seats (the one with golden paint on the horse's eyes and mane) the machinery kicked in and the platform slowly started spinning. Madeline gave a little squeal of delight and let herself be carried round along with nearly a dozen empty seats. The girl threw her head back and laughed, then looked at him in joy. She was spinning, and the whole world started to spin along with her, blurring out the dark surroundings. She was so happy. Happy because of this magical moment, but was she also happy because of him? Was that even possible?

"Come on!" She called him up with a wave of her hand. "Don't just stand there. Get up!"

And he did. He didn't even think about it. He simply got onto the moving platform in a couple of long steps and sat on a horse beside her, which was way too small for his tall frame. Even Madeline was surprised by the action. Pleasantly surprised that is. Her smile widened and that smile was just for him. Not for the brightness, not for the moment, but for him. It's been an awfully long time since someone's looked at him like that.

And just then Robert realized things were going terribly wrong.

There was a rule, to which It was bound as a consequence to its shape shifting powers. While taking another form, Its whole existence had to adapt to the way that form was functioning. It took over both the physical and mental features of the creature It became. Animalistic, murderous, evil. Its assets and weaknesses.

But this time it was too weak to take another form than human. And this was bad.

It was beginning to feel human emotions. Not just the usual ones, but the most dangerous of them all; affection.

It had to put this situation to an end. Fast.

"You know I used to love carousels as a kid. Back in the day, when I was still coming here with my mum, I always picked one and wanted to do nothing but ride on it all day long... That's probably the happiest childhood memory I've got." She said a bit shyly, then

lowered her eyes to avoid his gaze and added: "Thank you."

Robert gulped at her. These words sounded odd and alien. She wasn't supposed to thank him.

"For what?"

"For just being here I guess..." Madeline was looking anywhere but at him, her cheeks flushed and this kind of emotion he did not understand. However he strongly felt it seeding inside her and wasn't sure what exactly to do about it.

"The pleasure's mine, as long as you're willing to fulfill your promise."

She rolled her eyes. "You're not gonna let me get away without it anyway, right?"

Robert looked at her longingly from behind her back, knowing that she couldn't see his expression. Did he really grow to *like* this girl? Precious little thing.

"Right."

The ride began to slow down and so Madeline's enthusiasm vanished almost completely, giving way to another feeling, but not a very pleasant one. That feeling, which she couldn't name was making her tense inside with hesitation. Like a child reaching its hand to touch a flame. Was it dangerous? Would it burn?

And before she knew it, the ride was over, and he took her by the hand, leading her towards the hauntingly looking building with cracked windows. He was so eager all of a sudden... Maybe he felt it too.

They halted just in front of the big wooden door, his hand wrapped tight around hers. A bit too tight. The 'CRACK OF DOOM' sign hanging above their heads. The gray paint coating that mock-up of a spooky house suddenly seemed dire.

She had so many opportunities to just turn around and run. So many chances to escape. And she wasted them all. Why? Maybe she was just lonely. Maybe she was just curious. Or maybe both.

Madeline looked up at Robert once more with uneasiness building up on her face, and he did not turn to face her. Instead, his free hand reached for the handle and swung the door open, while he starkly shoved her inside.

Playtime was over.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4: Monster

His vision was kind of blurry and his steps slightly unsteady. He was having a hard time recognizing even the not so distant shapes. David probably shouldn't have drunk that much.

But then as the road turned, and he practically arrived at the back of the theme park, he saw a light. A golden light, beaming somewhere there, among the trees and splayed tents. He was right; she did come to the park. But did she really think all those lights wouldn't alarm anyone around? Well, so far they didn't. No security, no nosy neighbors... There wasn't a single soul in the streets. It seemed he'd have to do this by himself.

Climbing up the fence wasn't hard, but as he was about to shift to the other side, he slipped. His body scraped against the ground, leaving dirt all over his jeans and fancy leather jacket.

"Ah, fuck!" He cursed and his hands clenched into fists as he got up. His eyes narrowed at the brightness before him. "I hope she's having a good time... A good time, so I can watch that dumb, annoying, innocent expression fade from her little face." Dave mumbled as he was trying to wipe off the dirt from his clothes.

But what if she wasn't alone? The thought made him bolt up immediately, straight as a string. *Oh, she better be alone or her ass won't be the only one to get kicked.* His lips pressed together in a tight line, almost disappearing.

Suddenly his whole body shrugged startled. A scream ripped the silence, followed with a loud slam. *What the hell?*

As if hypnotized, David followed the dreadful sound.

She let out the loudest scream her lungs were able to make just mere seconds before she was violently pushed inside and the door shut

behind her. She could feel this moment coming. Robert's hand abruptly left hers, abandoning Madeline in the darkened room. The girl's heart skipped a beat and suddenly her breathing seemed awfully loud.

She gazed around, searching for something to hide behind, to hold onto, but the only real thing for her now was the wooden floor beneath her feet and the darkness coming from every direction.

Why did he do that?! What happened? What was *about* to happen?

Madeline blindly struggled to move around and not trip with each step.

"Robert?" Her quivering voice called after him.

All of a sudden, dazzling redness filled her eyes. Red neon. Of course. This was supposed to be a dark ride.

Before her, the small room opened to a series of corridors, draped with pieces of ripped cloth and huge cobwebs. During the day, the monsters hiding in the nooks were actors, hired to frighten those in need of a jump scare by wailing and screaming in their faces. There was still some popcorn scattered across the floor.

However, now the nightmare was real. There, at the end of the passageway just in front of her stood Robert, his back unnaturally bent forwards, arms tensed, like a wild animal ready to hunt down the chosen prey. And his eyes were no longer green. The man's pupils became two shiny yellow dots, gleaming at her threateningly.

Madeline's mouth went agape. She could *not* believe her eyes.

"Robert?" It was more of a silent, miserable plea than a question, but she got her answer anyway. His lips widened in a toothy grin, and she knew that expression couldn't belong to a human.

"No." It replied in a low, daunting whisper.

As the girl's heart thrilled in realization, at last she listened to all the warning signs, which were running around her mind for quite some time now, demanding to be heard. She ran into one of the dusty

corridors with the last bit of hope for getting out of there in one piece.

A psychopathic, otherworldly laugh resounded in her head, making her whimper in fright.

"Run little one, run! There's nowhere to hide..." That coarse, giggly voice hit her ears for the first time. Madeline was filled with panic and regret. A million hopeless thoughts were swirling in her head.

The twitching light was flooding the walls in red again and again as she scanned the surroundings restlessly.

"You can't run from *me*" Its voice came from behind and just as she turned, a large, gloved hand closed around her throat. The soft fabric digging into her sensitive skin.

"And just where do you think you're going?" The man seemed delighted with the girl's shocked face. Pure malice burned within those shining eyes. Another scream was caught in her throat and came as a muffled shrill.

"Poor little Madeline..." It laughed and pressed her trembling body harshly against the wall. "If you're looking for Robert, you won't find him here. He's gone." The girl's hopeless attempts at loosening the grip on her neck were no good. It only tightened and tightened, until her limbs went numb.

"Not completely gone of course, and who knows, maybe I'll use him again in the future, but I've had enough of playing for tonight." The creature in front of her took in every single gagged sound she made with pleasure, and her eyes widened as she noticed the white smudges slowly covering the skin on the face, which still belonged to a man. Like dried paint, it left a couple of cracks on his forehead.

He gazed at her intensively, examining every inch of fear exposed in her features and as he did that, a drool started forming on his flushed red lips. That color was also new. And it darkened to the most lush shade of crimson.

He swallowed hungrily, when his face inched closer to hers.

Madeline's heart pounded irrepressibly, as if it wanted to jump out of her chest.

Those glaring eyes closed for a second, and he inhaled, smelling the fear, for which he's been waiting for the last 27 years. His whole body immediately pressed to hers, and he let out a low, satisfied growl.

When his eyes opened again, they were crossed with dark, red lines going up from the corners of his mouth, resembling an impossibly wide smile.

"Tasty, tasty, beautiful fear... If only I could savor it over and over again..." He could feel her blood pulsating under his strong grip on her throat.

A small part of him told him to restrain the brutal instincts and not to go further, because it was still *her*. The girl, whose bright eyes sparkled in the golden light. Moments ago she thanked him just for being around. She trusted him.

But he did not listen to that part of him and shut down the thoughts, which surely were only the remains of the human hidden somewhere deep down inside.

As frightened as she was, Madeline suddenly felt another hand crawling up to her chest. He possessively placed it over her beating heart.

"Such a delightful being you are... So delicate, so innocent, so naive. Oh precious thing, hasn't anyone ever told you not to trust strangers?"

The girl's eyes filled with tears, she cried with the last bit of energy she's got left.

"Oh, hush, little one." His whisper shushed her like a baby.

Madeline was completely still, when he licked a single tear off her cheek.

"I promise I'll be quick about it. To tell the truth, I think it's a terrible

waste to break a pretty face like yours. If only I could spare you... If only there was anyone, who could save you..." He was mocking her. Making fun of how weak she really was. But for a brief second she saw a painful flicker in those bloodthirsty eyes. She knew there was a certain kind of well-covered powerlessness in the words. Or maybe it was just her imagination.

Madeline felt his hot breath against her neck. His face was inching closer with each second until his red-painted nose brushed against her cheek.

"So silent now... Haven't you got any more questions? You wanted to know me. Here I am."

Nothing could ever prepare her for what came next. His eyes rolled up, and she watched in horror as his mouth opened to reveal multiple layers of razor-sharp teeth.

This is it. She thought. This is the end.

Tiny black spots danced across the girl's vision, and she no longer had the strength to fight for air. The world around her slowly started to fade. Her ears caught a low, creaking sound somewhere in the distance. What was it? She didn't care. Just a while more and all this would be gone. Just a while more...

The next thing she knew was that a dazzling light fell upon them and after that, the grip around her throat was gone and her limp body collapsed onto the floor.

A flashlight. It was a flashlight.

"What the fuck?!" A male voice resounded in the corridor, as if from very far away. She knew that voice. Could it be?

"Madeline! W-wha..." David was so shocked he didn't realize the fatal position he's just found himself in.

"And who the fuck are you?!" There was no reply, but a furious growl. She wanted to see. She 'needed' to see what was happening but her head was heavy like a stone and it was still hard to breathe.

"No, no, no stay back you freak!"

Two, blurry silhouettes stood facing each other in the darkness. One was of a young man holding a flashlight, the other; noticeably taller and looming over the first one like an embodiment of a nightmare. After a second, she recognized David's leather jacket, which he was also wearing earlier this night. But the other figure wasn't familiar to her at all. He was wearing... a costume? Madeline had to blink several times to make sure she wasn't mistaken. Yes, it was an old-fashioned, silver costume with puffy sleeves and a collar on top. His hair also changed. It wasn't dark, but bright red. She wasn't really sure, because it would seem impossibly out of place in this truly horrible situation, but was he really dressed as a clown?

"I said, stay away!" David screamed and then Madeline saw something that haunted her dreams many nights after this one.

With a great force, the creature in the costume reached its large hand through David's chest.

He dropped his flashlight.

The harsh sound of breaking bones filled her ears, and she didn't want to see or hear anything anymore. Maybe she should've died.

These sharp teeth, which were supposed to rip her apart, sunk into the young man's flesh instead, and in that moment Madeline didn't see just one monster in front of her. In that split-second, an endless number of faces reflected in the clown's features and the girl shut her eyes, curling on the ground.

The horrendous crunching didn't stop for a couple of minutes. Madeline didn't dare to move until all was silent again, but even then she did not open her eyes.

Before she passed away, she heard a subtle sound of bells getting close to her and felt a gloved hand running through her hair.

5. Chapter 5 pt1

Chapter 5: Death and Mercy pt.1

She was wakened up by the first streaks of clear sunlight reflecting on her face. Her breathing was calm and the mattress underneath her comfortable as never before. Madeline was laying on her back, delighted by the moment, not wanting to wake up yet and even though it was early Monday morning, everything seemed to be just fine. She opened her eyes slowly to see the familiar sight of her bedroom. Never has she been so happy to see that slightly tilted bookshelf or that old, wooden chest of drawers. The girl felt at peace and only one thought kept on repeating itself in her head;

It was all a dream.

No, a nightmare. The most terrifying one I've ever had. But now it's gone. He's gone. I didn't leave home last night. I didn't go to the park. I didn't ride on that damned carousel. I didn't witness David's death. All of this never happened. No monsters. No blood. No death.

However, to her horrible misfortune, Madeline realized how awfully wrong she was just as she began to sit up. An intensive, blunt pain, which went through her neck was an irrefutable proof that the truth was completely different, than she'd want it to.

She lifted herself up on her elbows and reached to touch the source of the pain. As her fingers traced the swollen skin, all the disturbing images from last night stormed through her head. *But how? How could such horrifying things be true?* Madeline stared blankly into nothingness, imagining Robert Gray — the most charming man she's ever seen — turn into that dreadful thing, that monster, that *demon*.

Did everything beautiful always have to turn her hopes down in the end? Couldn't it ever remain the way it was?

She hopelessly burried her face in her shaking palms. The monster lived. Furthermore, it lived here, in Derry and wanted to hunt her down.

"No... No, God, please no." She called quietly.

But what could she possibly do? Close herself up here, in the house? Should she tell anyone? Seek help? No, probably not. 'Last night a demonic clown tried to eat my face, please help me!' No one would *ever* believe her.

Letting out a deep sigh, Madeline tried to collect what was left of her sanity and got up. The fact, that she woke up at home was the only comforting thing she could hold onto, so the girl didn't bother to question why was that. She left her room and peeked into her mother's on her way to the bathroom.

Lynn was sprawled on her bed in a funny way, her red hair enveloping her face like a halo. The woman looked lovely, even with yesterday's makeup blurred on her face. She was still in her clothes, only the red shoes were left on the floor. The room was a mess as most of the time, but that didn't trouble Madeline. The girl's eyes rested on the red heels, and right away she knew. She knew her mother has done it again.

Lynn wasn't technically a prostitute, oh no. She worked as a waitress, a really devoted one, working overtime probably more often than she should. Only sometimes it just wasn't enough. And Lynn was a beautiful woman. So, once or twice a week, she put on the red shoes and didn't come back home for the night. It was a disgraceful business really, but being a single mother and not having the required qualifications, Lynn did not have many options. Despite all, she was still very young.

It seemed, that this night both the girl and the woman were out. Funny thought, that while Madeline tried to sneak out of the house unnoticed, her mother wasn't even at home. Since Madeline's father left them, these shoes were a clear sign, and she tried her hardest not to be upset with her mother because of that. Lynn was still trying her best to be a good parent and valued her daughter more than anything. They only had each other.

The girl moved back and made her way to the bathroom, keeping her head down as she closed the door behind. She didn't want to look in the mirror. She knew what it would show. Yet still, she needed to fix

her appearance if she wanted to look as if nothing happened. Otherwise, her look would only give her classmates another topic for their gossips and Madeline surely didn't need that. Finally, she faced herself in the oval-shaped mirror and winced slightly.

The bruise encircled her neck like a ring of livid color. How the hell was she supposed to explain that to Lynn? The girl observed herself in the mirror, not even aware she was comparing her look to her mother's again. Hair a shade darker. Lips a bit smaller. Eyes a lot bigger. Nose just slightly perky. Pale completion. To Madeline, it was a queer mix, and she probably wouldn't define it as better than 'not completely ordinary', but it did certainly make a peculiar appearance.

The two gold painted pins she had on yesterday were still in her hair. One was missing.

The morning sun shone through a heavy grating on top of the underground dome in the center of the Derry sewer system. It went through the floating body of a boy in a leather jacket, who just happened to be in the wrong place, at the wrong time. He was just one of the many dead children, floating around the huge pile of abandoned remains, that they've left behind. The trophies of It.

And It itself watched as the diffused light filled the place, brightening Pennywise's lair.

The clown toyed with the golden pin, turning it in his gloved fingers. Blood stained his ruffed collar. He was back. After the 27 years, in his favorite form, with his first victim high up above the ground. Everything was back to normal. Back to as it should be...

Except it wasn't.

He didn't feel powerful nor satiated in the least. The first kill did not bring the satisfaction he expected, but even greater, tormenting thirst. What was that unfamiliar feeling? That unbearable urge to get to someone without the intention to tear them to shreds, but simply... be around. He's never felt anything like that, and it was driving him crazy. And what made the situation the more irritating, was that when he looked up at the floating bodies he was still full of hate

towards mankind, and very much enjoyed the thought of human fear and suffering.

It was just her. Only towards her was he now feeling all those strange emotions.

The clown examined the golden pin on his palm. It was way too subtle and shiny for this place. Like a single, little star among the empty skies. It was just like the girl, to which it belonged to. The one he was grateful he didn't have to kill. The one he picked up and carried to her home, then gently lay her in her bed. That kind of behavior didn't suit him one bit, but when he was standing there; tall and powerful, with fresh blood still dripping from his mouth, almost ready to take that precious life of hers and feel the way her fragile body would easily break, he just couldn't do it. Was that an act of mercy? Or maybe something far more intimate?

Pennywise clenched his jaws and his sharp gaze hardened. Then, something strange happened. Something, that has never had place before. His gleaming eyes went down to one of the pools of filthy water under his boots. He observed his own reflection.

You're a monster. A nightmare, an entity destined to sicken and terrify the hearts of the young, and nothing's ever going to change that. His brows furrowed, and he held the golden pin tighter. Was it even possible that the thought made him... upset?

But it doesn't have to be like this. At least not all the time.

"Predation is a biological interaction where a predator — an organism that is hunting — feeds on its prey — the organism that is attacked. Predators may or may not kill their prey prior to feeding on it, but the act of predation often results in the death of the prey. It could also constitute a chase, stalking, or attack of prey. Thus, predation is often, though not always, carnivory. Other categories..." The female speaker's recorded voice resounded in the slightly darkened classroom, serving as an explanation to the scientific presentation showed by a projector.

Madeline's fingernails tapped nervously against the desk. When Mr.

Branow announced the topic of today's lesson, the girl thought her skull would simply explode.

Perfect. Just perfect.

She couldn't stop fixing the tight turtleneck of the gray sweater she chose to wear today. It was the only garment she had, which covered her neck properly, and she hated the prickly material.

"There are few various types of feeding behaviors. A true predator is one that kills and eats another living thing. Some predators kill large prey and dismember or chew it prior to eating it, such as a jaguar or a human."

Oh, Madeline knew exactly what a true predator was. Trying to look anywhere but at the images of hunting animals in front of her, the girl examined the surroundings, then the students, noticing, that unexpectedly most of them were interested in the presentation.

"Grazing organisms generally do not kill their prey. Many of them only eat a small part of the plants that they graze."

Was her attacker a grazing organism or just the opposite? She could still hear David's ribs breaking in the dark corridor dimmed by red light. The thought made her feel sick. Madeline's gaze turned to her biology teacher. Mr Branow was also deeply interested and watched the slides from behind his small, round glasses. She often liked to misspell his last name in her mind as 'Barn Owl', because of his specific body posture and the hoar-ish color of his hair. But she couldn't concentrate even on that.

"Parasitoids are organisms living in or on their host and feeding directly upon it. However, unlike parasites, they are very similar to true predators in that the fate of their prey is quite inevitably death."

Something in those last few sentences made Madeline's heart freeze. How could such awful things be said in a calm voice like that? What a terrible thing it had to be; living as the host...

A/N: Hi everyone! This chapter came out wayy longer than I

expected, so divided it in two parts (you can expect an update very soon ;) I hope you enjoy!

Also, I would like to thank all those, who favorited, followed and (especially) rewieved this story, as well as the ones, who corrected me. You guys give me the inspiration to go on with writing and make me feel a lot more worthy. Please continue to give me your support. Love y'all :*

6. Chapter 5 pt2

Chapter 5: Death and Mercy pt.2

Suddenly, the bell rang and lights switched on, distracting the girl from her thoughts.

"Alright everyone, we'll continue on the subject after the break." Mr. Branow stated in his low, aged voice, and Madeline observed as the teenagers immediately divided into small groups, chatting casually. One could consider it sad, but the girl didn't mind sitting alone anymore. Even if the whole situation was different, she would've probably chosen to be a loner anyway. Besides, she had far too many things troubling her now.

Speaking of which, her head turned alarmed immediately as she heard a muffled voice from across the room say:

"...yeah, they say the blood was everywhere. And they found a flashlight somewhere near the crime scene. What? No, I don't know whose was it. Someone must've broken in..."

Madeline's heart skipped a beat. *David*. They surely were talking about him. She had to get to know more, and if she wasn't mistaken, the voice belonged to Sandra Tacker, daughter of a police officer. The girl stood up and walked towards the group, sitting at the other side of the room. *Just try not to sound too desperate. And be careful not to spill anything. They mustn't know you were there.*

She approached the group, and of course there she was; Sandra — the main gossip, surrounded by maybe five or six people with pity and concern on their faces. But if you looked closely, you could also see the excitement, burning somewhere deep down inside.

"What's going on? What's all the fuss about?" Asked Madeline, happy that her voice didn't break halfway through the sentence. Their conversation was interrupted, and for a brief moment they all looked at her like she was an alien, surprised she dared to join in. Some tried to be less evident about it, like the short boy with blond hair, or the

freckled girl, whose skin was a shade darker than others', but that was just another thing Madeline grew to get used to. First to speak was Sandra.

"Do you live under a rock or what? The workers found a pool of blood this morning, while they were removing the theme park stuff." Sandra made sure the tone of her voice gave off the fact that she didn't really want to share this information.

"Oh, that-that's awful." The aversion in her voice wasn't even pretended. "Did the police find anything else? Are there any... suspects yet?"

"Pff, no. They still haven't even found the body. And why are you so nosy all of a sudden, hm? Maybe 'you' know something about it?" Sandra pointed out caustically, putting a strand of her golden hair behind her ear.

"Yeah, she sure does!" Laughed someone, but Madeline was done talking.

They didn't know. They had not the slightest idea what danger prowled in the night, just waiting to bear its sharp teeth at them. It wasn't just a break-in or homicide. It was a hunt of only one predator and the whole town filled with prey.

But after a while, Madeline was about to realize, that there was much more to be discovered about the dreadful creature she encountered last night. After the classes had finished, the freckled girl came up to her. Madeline was just going outside the main entrance, when she felt a light tap on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry for Sandra back there... And in general. They have no idea what they're talking about." The girl was the same height as Madeline and probably just as anxious. The way she kept her gaze down and played with the material of her shirt gave away the nervousness.

"But you do?" Madeline asked, visibly surprised.

"Yes." That was a clear, cold statement. "You know, my mother's sister was murdered in a similar way about thirty years ago. I mean, it

wasn't officially confirmed as a murder, because they never found the body. Only a shoe." Her voice was dead-serious and almost dried out of emotions, giving Madeline goosebumps.

"She disappeared along with many other kids that time, and I'm sure if there were any tracks, they would lead to the sewers one way or another..." The freckled girl made a pause and looked Madeline in the eye. Suddenly, the neatly brushed ponytail, and the perfectly ironed shirt with a flower pattern didn't fit her. The girl seemed a lot older as she spoke about the past of her long gone family member.

"Take care." She added and simply walked off, leaving Madeline deeply confused. Later on, she spent a lot of time on trying to remind herself the girl's name. They were in the same class. She must've heard it many times before, but just didn't pay attention.

Ripsom. It was Amanda Ripsom.

On her way home, Madeline decided to go through the Barrens. It was just that kind of place where you went if you wanted to think things over, or simply wanted to be left alone; peaceful and quiet. Buried in her own thoughts, she didn't notice the silhouette following her down the street, and then down the grassy path, but more carefully.

The girl walked along the stony trail near the river and watched the sunlight reflexes dance across its surface. The prettiness of it made her feel at ease, as fresh, cool breeze calmed her nerves. If she could, she'd stay just there forever and forget about the world, but of course, there wasn't such possibility. Ahead of her, there was an opening to a huge tunnel and it definitely caught the girl's attention. She came closer, glancing at all the long vines and the moss covering it. An unpleasant smell reached her nostrils. The sewers.

What did Amanda say again? That the tracks would lead to the sewers... With a cautious look on her face, Madeline took a hesitant peek inside, but before she could see anything, something harshly pulled her back making the girl fall backwards and her rear was damped in the river. Her backpack thumped against the ground. A significantly lousy, male figure came into her vision, and Madeline was almost sure she's seen the guy before.

"What did you do to him?!" He yelled, standing above her with clenched fists. His shoulders were broad, and he was notably bigger than her.

"Wha-what do you mea-"

"I mean Dave, you scum! Where is he?"

The girl gulped at him in shock. Of course, it had to one of David's friends... But what was she supposed to do? David was dead and this guy right there was wildly pissed off.

"I knew he was going to go after you as soon as I saw that idiotic, miserable look on his face. So let me ask again, and don't fucking test my patience you little shit. What did you do to David?" He bent over her, so she could take a closer look on his outraged expression. The long, brown curls of his hair partly covering his eyes and bushy eyebrows.

"I didn't do anything, I have no idea what you're ta-"

"Bullshit!" Madeline tried to keep her tone calm and seemingly honest, but the guy interrupted her again.

"Something fuckin' horrible happened in the park last night and now David is missing if not already dead! And all that's just because you've been bitchin' around just like your mother!" Madeline shrugged in fright, as he raised a hand towards her threateningly.

"I'm gonna kill you, you little bitch!"

"Say that again." Someone called from behind and they both froze. "Say that again, and know, that if you will, you'll never say a *word* no more." Every word was pronounced slowly, with serenity, which made it sound the more menacing, and the girl gasped now scared even more, because she knew the only person who'd be able to talk like that. Her attacker, whose name was still unknown to Madeline, turned his head but didn't get off her.

"Oh yeah? And who are you to give me orders?" The guy asked, eyeing obstinately his interlocutor, who only chuckled in reply. Madeline's heart squeezed. She'd recognize that laugh anywhere.

Gray.

"Get lost, prick. Why don't you just mind your own business?"

Again, there was no audible answer. Robert came closer and at last Madeline could see him. His expression was untroubled, joyous even, as he approached the brown-haired guy, coming just a bit too close.

"Why don't you threaten someone your own size?" Robert smiled as he looked into the young man's eyes.

Madeline didn't know just which of the monsters her attacker was seeing. For the girl it was still the same tall, handsome man, but the big guy's eyes widened in pure terror and he lost his temper immediately. He wasn't even able to say a word and simply started backing away one step after another, almost tripping under the stony ground, while Robert didn't make a single move.

The still half soaked girl watched them, thinking it would be better if Robert didn't show up here at all. And why on earth did he stand up for her? Did he intend to finish her himself?

Finally, the nameless guy ran off, and without thinking, Madeline struggled to get up as quick as she could, but Robert was faster. Before she could even blink, he turned towards her, and she knew there was no point in running away. So she winced and looked away, waiting for the pain, for whatever he was about to do to her, but... Nothing came.

When she looked at him again, she saw only his outstretched hand. The girl blinked at him in confusion. Was he... offering help? Unexpectedly, it did seem so, but she rejected it, clumsily standing up, water dripping from her clothes.

"A 'thank you' would be appreciated, Madeline." He said in that heavenly voice of his, but Madeline wasn't to be fooled again. Not this time. She avoided even looking at him and gathered her things from the ground hastily.

"Thank you? Why would I thank you? For trying to kill me? For the trauma? For... for murdering my friend?" Why was she even saying

that? She should just shut up and leave.

"He wasn't your friend. He'd do awful things to you, I've seen it in his mind."

"And you didn't?!" She spat at him, sudden indignation rising within her. "Why do you defend me? So you can torment me all by yourself?"

Robert was about to say something, scowl at her for being so insolent, but the words just got stuck in his throat as he noticed the purple swollen skin under the neck of her sweater. His doing, his fault, his cruelty. And she stood there, all wet and messy, with eyes full of determination, almost *daring* him to make a spiteful move. Something inside of him broke. His hand reached mindlessly towards the bruise as if in attempt to erase it, but Madeline stepped back, not allowing it. The girl's eyebrows furrowed in consternation. She did not know what to think.

Was it pity in his eyes? Or... regret? No. No, no, she wasn't going to fall for this again. Turning away, she ran as fast as she could and didn't look back. Her soaked shoes made one plashy sound after another and their pace didn't slow down until Madeline found herself on a sidewalk again, somewhere near her neighborhood. The girl needed at least a full minute to ease her breath and be able to carry on without collapsing. She must've looked ridiculous, but finally, there were actual people on the street and that made her feel a lot more safe. Madeline didn't even notice it's started to drizzle, while she was busy running for her life. Now the raindrops were leaving tiny, watery spots where her clothes were still dry. She thought she escaped him, that here, among others she was out of his reach.

How *naive* of her.

Just after a few seconds, after the brief moment of freedom she had, someone stood in her way, appearing entirely out of nowhere yet again.

"Stubborn child, you can't just stay put in one place, can you?" That someone was of course Robert. The girl just gaped at him in astonishment. "Well, we shall see about that, and now..." He was

holding a yellow raincoat, which he didn't seem to have before and put it around her shoulders just a bit forcibly. "...I'm going to walk you home, and you're 'not' gonna complain about it." After fixing up the raincoat on her small figure, he left his arm wrapped around her, squeezing her shoulder gently. It wasn't a request nor could Madeline disobey it.

Robert did as he said, walking her down the rainy street, and none of the ones, who passed them by paid any unwanted attention to these two. At first, Madeline was stiff as a stick and slightly panicked, but her tension eased out eventually and the girl kept on glancing questioningly at the man. She had many questions, but asked none of them, just as she tried to pretend she wasn't admiring the perfect angle of his jawline from the corner of her eye.

After they arrived at her house, he disappeared just like that, without a word and the girl was left alone again.

What the hell did just happen? Am I losing my mind? Is that it? Why... Ahh, this doesn't make any sense! She thought and examined the fateful raincoat again. It certainly didn't belong to him, due to its size, so whose was it? Then, the girl felt something tiny at the bottom of the left pocket. She pulled the small object out.

Her golden pin.

7. Chapter 6

Chapter 6: Midnight Visit

That's what they did, wasn't it? Humans. They walked each other home. But did they follow one another afterward? Did they watch from the other side of the rusty window, biting their lips and swallowing back the hunger? It was fascinating how fast Pennywise was able to embrace his human form, and it was way easier when he didn't hold back, but simply let those 'more civilized' emotions flow in his veins. True, it was incomparably less fun, and made him do things he'd never even consider doing, but he wanted to try. Try and keep pretending though she's already seen him as he was, to see if she could somehow still trust him. He told himself it was only to put down her guard, however that was a lie. It didn't really have a plan, only the longing to see her smile the way she did that one time, when he made her happy. That was something Pennywise never had before, and perhaps that was why that wicked, selfish heart of his craved it so much. She's given him a taste of something entirely new, and he wanted to have all of it. All of her.

Lurking somewhere in the shadows, It watched Madeline sitting at her desk over a huge book, scribbling something in her notebook from time to time. Once, she was deeply focused on her work, once she'd just stare blankly at the pages, not reading a single word, but thinking of something entirely else. Was it of him? She was a very confused little girl and the swift changes in It's behaviour certainly weren't helping. Like if Madeline didn't have enough problems on her own. After a while, she gave up studying and went to the bathroom, tiredly rubbing her eyes. It was a late hour after all, and so it happened, that the bathroom had one small window on the same side of the building, so he could see her perfectly. When the girl took off the gray sweater, exposing her soft, pale skin to his view, the clown felt every muscle in his body tense. The dark waves of her hair covered her bare shoulders like a veil and he knew if he kept watching, it wouldn't have ended well for Madeline. He still needed more self-control. He needed to satisfy the hunger in the pit of his stomach if he didn't want to come one step too close, one bite too

much.

And now was indeed the perfect occasion, because Pennywise wasn't here only for her. The girl's house was just a stop on the way to a certain young man. A young man with fear of needles. Such a common fear for such an uncommonly rude boy.

It found him in the park, sitting on a bench near the so said 'crime scene', still not willing to accept his best friend's death.

"Chrissss... Chris, Chris, Chris." Wind carried the creatures daunting whispers. The boy's head turned, not sure if he heard his name right. "You've been a very rude boy recently, Chris."

"Who's there?" He called, standing up and glanced around warily.

"You should learn when to keep your dirty mouth shut, but easy now, ha-ha! I'll take care of that." The crooked voice made Chris' whole body shake and just when he turned to run, he felt a sharp nib of pain pierce his leg. The boy tumbled flatly onto the ground, more like a lifeless sack of flesh and bones than a living thing. Those pointed objects dug deeper, pricking his skin to the very muscle and as the boy struggled to break free from this death grip, he saw a shadow of a horrific, otherworldly being with golden eyes, its grotesque long fingers and teeth resembling needles of enormous size.

As it often was in Derry, no one heard his screams.

The next day after classes, Madeline spent in the library, searching for something that'd answer at least a small part of the questions that made her toss and turn in her sleep. And she did, however it took a while. After hours of useless research, she walked up to the counter to return those dusty books about the history of Derry and the ones about different types of monsters (nothing more, but fabrications really) and paranormal subjects. The girl thought that's how her small 'investigation' ended, but her last hope turned out to be the librarian. Seeing the resignation on her face, the man asked:

"Haven't you found what you've been looking for?"

"Not really, no."

He was lean and of usual height. Though he was probably in his forties, the dark, creased texture of his skin made him look a lot older and kind of... tired. He gazed at her kindly, then at the books and for a moment his brows furrowed. Then again, the librarian directed his gaze back at Madeline, intrigued.

"Maybe I've got something for you." And with that, he gave her an odd looking album with no label and no title. Despite all, Madeline decided to give it a shot and did not regret it. It contained loads of information. Every single catastrophe, unsolved crime and mystery along with the disappearances of kids and not only kids were cataloged inside. Some of the pictures were so old, she could hardly see anything in them, not even mentioning how aged were the cut newspaper sections. There were a lot of handwritten little notes and insertions, so maybe it was his own album, who knows.

She read about the Easter Explosion and the Black Spot. She saw countless kids' faces on the scans of the Missing posters, and she just knew. She could *feel* it was all his doing. The girl still didn't know how it was possible, but she was so sure she could bet her life on it. And her assumptions got confirmed just as she was leaving the library. At one of the tables, there lay a couple copies of today's newspaper. Had she not stopped for this little while, had she not read the head title she would've walked out completely clueless. What she saw caused her whole body to go stiff as she held the newspaper in her sweaty palms. There was a picture of a guy, but not just any guy — *the* guy. The one that attacked Madeline yesterday. And to tell the truth, it wasn't entirely him, but just a part of him, more specifically; his head. Only the head. It was torn apart from the rest of the missing body and the boy's mouth were left open unnaturally wide, so wide that the skin on his cheeks started to give in. His mouth were practically ripped off.

He'd intended to wake her up before he found himself in Madeline's room again. The boy's body kept Pennywise busy until the very evening and now he was well-fed just in case... He really didn't want to harm her. Or else, he did want to, and that's why he had to make sure he wouldn't.

He'd intended to wake her up, although when his eyes settled on her trembling body, and he sensed the fear around, the clown decided he could wait a while more before putting on the human skin. The situation was not to be interrupted. She was dreaming, and what a marvelous dream it was...

All was dark and filthy. The revolting smell filled the tunnel, rats were scraping by. There, in the middle of the sewer maze was Madeline; terrified, exhausted and completely lost, but not alone. Hundreds of feet splashed against the water along with hers. The girl was still trying to escape, even though it was clear, there was no hope left. The deformed silhouettes surrounded her from every direction, trying to gain her attention, grasping against her clothing and pulling her hair. Madeline tried not to look at the open wounds on their flaccid bodies and their pained expressions, dried out of life.

"Don't you like it here, Maddie? Don't you wanna stay?"

"Because you will! You should! You were supposed to be one of us by now." Both boys and girls wailed at her.

"You should be floating up above us all. Why don't you join us? What makes you better than us, Maddie? Why are you still alive?"

Rot and sickness covered all the young faces, which encircled the girl like a spreading disease. She kicked and screamed, but it was no use. Caged in a trap of crooked, dirty limbs and hateful stares, she began to lose her breath. Nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. They were telling the truth.

"Why are you so selfish? Why do you commune with the monster, who took our lives? Why does It want you by its side? Why, Maddie, why?"

"You should be dead!"

And then, she woke up, drenched in cold sweat, breathing heavy as if she's just run a marathon. Madeline's head was still spinning, and she buried her face in the mattress, tightening the bedsheets around her to make sure she was safe again. Robert watched her from across the room hidden in the shadows, smiling. Seeing her shrug and huff

nervously, he came closer, inaudibly, then ran his hand through the tangled strands of her hair.

"Hush now." He murmured. "Such a wondrous imagination you have..." Madeline's breath momentarily stopped and her eyes snapped open, alarmed. The girl immediately escaped his touch and recoiled back from the dark, tall figure.

"It's you! What are you doing here?" He caught her off-guard and was very much proud of it.

"Oh, don't act so offended, I just stopped by... To pay you a little visit."

"But to my knowledge you don't really 'pay little visits', do you? It's just not your style. Unless you come to kill." There was a hint of fear in her voice, but a very faint one. Amusement washed off from the man's features.

"Let me decide what is my style and what isn't. You know nothing about me." The coldness emanating from him, enveloped Robert like an invisible wall, but Madeline wouldn't let it be for long.

"You've been inhabiting this town and terrorizing it for God knows how long. You come back to life every 27 years and when you do, often hundreds of people die, mostly kids and teenagers. You're the cause of basically everything bad that happens here during the time, but no one does anything about it." She recited as if reading a book, looking into his eyes the whole time.

"My, my, someone's really done their homework. Is there anything else?" He bantered.

There was.

"You know no mercy nor kindness. You are not human." These words were almost a physical pain to Madeline. They burned her tongue, but she just had to say it.

"You wound me child, have I not shown you mercy? Have I not been kind with you? Do I not seem human enough?" With that, Robert gestured at his appearance.

What more could you want, I'm trying to change for you, girl.

"It's all fake. It's just pretend." The girl admitted, more to herself than to him, but it angered him anyway. He could get really mad, when things weren't going his way and with this girl they never did.

If that's how we're gonna play...

"Really? Why is it so 'fake'?" His eyes were burning holes in the girls' skull as he bent closer.

"You murdered that boy yesterday. Tore his head off." Madeline's bravery was running out and her voice became quieter. That fact was a reminder what kind of creature was standing in front of her. Robert's eyes narrowed, noticing the girl's rising doubt, and he smiled sinisterly.

"Darling, I didn't do just that." With each second he was getting closer and closer until his face was at the same level as hers, and even then he didn't stop and inched his lips to her ear. Madeline was far too rigid to make a move.

"I ate him." The man whispered, and as his breath brushed against her skin, her heart skipped a beat straightaway.

She knew that. She did. But to hear him say it, admit it with such ease...

"I feasted on every single one of them and I will do it again. I'll take one life after another and there is nothing, that could stop me for I am eternal." He continued, not sounding like himself anymore. Some irresistible, powerful force beamed in his tone, and actually, It felt quite relieved. "But you, Madeline, you are somehow different. You..." His fingers came to caress the girl's jawline, making her suddenly very aware of the situation she's just found herself in. Alone with him, alone with a murderer, a monster. She should be repulsed and yet, she was feeling something entirely else. Robert's thumb brushed slowly against her bottom lip, resting on her chin. Madeline searched his stare and noticed just how he was looking at her. Like at a treasure. She's never felt so vulnerable in her life.

"What... are you?" The girl asked weakly.

"I've got many names. Most of which you don't want to know."

There was a moment of silence between them, while her eyes traced Robert's smooth, perfect features. That was it. He was too perfect, and such perfection did not satisfy her. She wanted only one thing just from the beginning; *to know*.

"What is the truest of them? Show me." 'If he wanted to hurt me, he would. Right here, right now. Or yesterday. Or any other moment at all, but so far he didn't.' The thought gave Madeline a new kind of determination.

Robert gave a quiet chuckle, taken aback by her words.

"Your bravery is a mystery to me, little one. But I'd prefer not to do that. I can't fully rely on myself in that form, and you've already experienced it."

"I'd rather take the harsh truth than a gracious lie."

The man lifted her chin and examined her with admiration. His eyes glistened in the dark, while their noses almost touched.

"For now there is only one truth, that you should know."

His lips crushed against hers, not even giving the poor girl time to prepare herself for what was to come. Feeling the sudden warmth of Robert's mouth, she gasped in surprise and he used it to deepen the kiss. His hand slid onto her back, pulling her close, while Madeline was all stiff and panicked, for she was never kissed before. His lips moved passionately, slowly, taking their time, while her heart pounded like crazy, as if it wanted to jump out of her chest. After a while, she found a way to catch up with the rhythm and no longer felt awkward, but literally melted in his grip and could just *feel* the one-sided grin spreading across his face.

But then, something changed. The man's breathing became faster and heavier, the gesture more possessive. At first, the girl felt his nails scrape the skin on her back like claws, then the sharpness of his teeth as his mouth dug deeper into hers, almost forcefully. And was it just

her imagination, or has he just grown a couple of inches? She was left breathless and the kiss was more than she could take, but he didn't stop, only groped her tighter and let his tongue entwine with hers. His movement grew harsh and greedy, dominating her unsure actions completely. Madeline tried to push back, but Robert's body was hard as a stone.

It, on the other hand, felt just great. Caught in between two forms, it felt like a caged animal set free, like a color-blind person seeing things as they were for the first time. She felt so small, so fragile in comparison to his power and it was delightful. Just... right. All the scents, all the emotions. Her emotions.

Those new sensations had taken over, and he pushed the girl on top of the mattress, positioning himself over her. He wanted to taste it all so bad. When their kiss broke and she could finally take a look at him, Madeline did not see Robert. She saw the face of a clown, smiling down at her wickedly. And then he suddenly stopped, putting a finger to his red lips, shushing her. Madeline was drawn out of this fanciful moment and brought back to reality as she heard someone entering the room.

8. Chapter 7

Chapter 7: Camouflage

That was a close one. When her mother walked in, he was already gone. The clown stormed through his lair not knowing if he should be happy or angry with himself. Did he really just *kiss* her? Craving for Madeline's closeness and fighting the urge to eat her alive at the same time was already confusing enough, but this? It seemed like for that single moment, It's human form took whole advantage of the situation and it just... happened. Not that Pennywise didn't take pleasure in it. Though such 'romantic' actions could only belong to a human, there was something in it for him as well. The feeling of her flesh on his mouth was extraordinary. When he licked his lips there was still some left. He could really taste her without causing hurt, and that brought the predator back in control. It'd be true to admit, that such close contact, but in a different manner than usual, got him a bit carried off. He would've gone further if Lynn didn't interrupt them.

How long could he keep being careful? It was obvious, at some point in the future he won't be able to hold back if things like this keep happening. And he wanted them to. He was *going to* make them happen, because there was just no other way. The sensation was too tempting.

Although It couldn't let Robert's persona take over again, and modify its intentions more than they already were.

Some try to restrain their demons, but in this case it was the human, that needed to be tamed.

"Mum! What are you doing here?" Madeline was still quite shaken up. It was a relief, that her flushed cheeks and widened pupils were not so evident in the dark.

"Are you OK, dear?" Asked Lynn with a sleepy voice. One could think the woman was still half-asleep. "I heard a noise and came up to

check... my God, you're shaking! Is everything alright?" The woman was there, examining her daughter warily in a blink of an eye, and the girl hastily pulled up the sheets to cover her neck.

"I'm fine mum, it was just... a bad dream." Even if it was a dream, it certainly wasn't a bad one, but Lynn didn't have to know that. She obviously took Madeline's excitement for fear.

"Oh, well that's a relief. You almost got me worried." She sighed and smiled weakly at the girl. "Nightmares aren't that bad, you know. They always end before the worst things happen. Reality is way scarier..." The old t-shirt in which she used to sleep was slipping off her shoulder and for a moment Lynn's face seemed far too young for an experienced woman saying such things. "Sorry, I'm not helpful at all, I guess I shouldn't be saying that."

"No, I'm sorry to wake you up like this, you shouldn't even bother. It's fine." Said Madeline, still a bit embarrassed.

"If you say so" The woman agreed after a moment of silence, and she really believed it was true. Madeline's weird hiding under the covers didn't make her suspect a thing. Then, she simply got up, giving her daughter a kiss on the forehead, and left with a yawn.

The girl waited until she heard her bedroom door close, then another ten or fifteen seconds holding her breath, and sighed with relief when nothing happened. She was left alone again, and knew straightaway, it wasn't going to be easy to fall back asleep. There was no room for dreams in her mind right now, for it's been filled with all sorts of new emotions she had yet to figure out.

Madeline brought one hand to her lips and traced their outline thoughtfully. They were still slightly swollen in certain places, she could feel it in her mouth.

By the end of the night, the girl came to be fundamentally aware of two things.

First one; she was kissed by a monster, second; though she'd never, ever admit it, she liked it.

That was not a happy thought at all. Madeline felt bad for it, and it only made the situation more complicated, especially while looking at Amanda, sitting in the classroom.

Why are you so selfish? Why do you commune with the monster that took our lives?

But did it really change anything? She was still in danger, right? The neck of her sweater still prickled, and underneath it, there were four long, red lines on her back. He didn't nick the skin though, just chafed it enough to leave a mark. The girl gazed at all the students, trying to swallow the sudden lump in her throat. Who will be next?

Today Madeline couldn't really focus on anything. About five minutes after each lesson had begun, she drifted off and let her mind take her away from all the troubling thoughts. She imagined herself safe, in some distant, utopic place, wrapped in someone's strong arms. She didn't know who was it supposed to be, nor she had the need to. It just gave her the feeling she always dreamed of having, and that was enough. Occasionally, a thrown paper ball or a pencil would bring her back to reality, but she paid little attention to such small provocations.

It was only during the biology class, that she tried to keep concentrated. When Mr. Branow walked in, the whole class went silent. He was one of the few professors they really liked and, what was ever rarer, respected. But as soon as he appeared, Madeline sensed something about him was out of place. The girl couldn't tell what exactly, yet she felt he was somehow changed.

"Good day everyone. So, let's see... During the previous lesson, we talked about the many types of predators, depending on their interaction with their prey. Today's topic is a bit different, but still, related. Now..."

There just has got to be something wrong, something missing. Thought Madeline, and allowed herself to examine the man from head to toe, knowing he wouldn't notice a girl gazing at him suspiciously from the back of the classroom. Teachers hardly ever noticed her, and because she was always quiet and her grades weren't a problem, usually just left her be.

His voice is the same, his grayish hair combed to the back as usual, posture just slightly hunched... Everything seems right, but I could swear it's not. She watched his movement, analyzing every single detail, but it was no good. The girl got so lost in the activity, she didn't hear him say her name at first.

"I think miss Glave should give us the answer. Miss Galve? Are you listening?" Madeline was dragged out of her thoughts and glanced around, disoriented. Was he really asking her? And what was the question? Her classmates all started to turn, some of them giggling at the girl's panicked expression, while she flipped through her book hopelessly, searching for anything useful. It was pointless, of course, and Mr. Branow watched her with amusement. Finally, Madeline gave up and asked:

"I'm sorry sir, could you repeat the question?"

When she gained the courage to look her teacher in the eye, just then she knew what was wrong.

"That's what I thought. You should pay more attention, Madeline." His gaze was sharp and crystal-clear, not mild, not covered by the two small lenses. "Normally, I wouldn't do it, but I'll ask again just because I like you. What makes a predator successful at hunt?"

A smirk crept to his lips, and Madeline's eyes widened.

What the hell did he just say? 'Because I like you'? In front of the whole class? This doesn't sound like him at all!

And yet no one seemed to notice, just as if nothing happened. He still awaited an answer.

"Umm- " Even if it was already mentioned during the lesson, she couldn't remember anything helpful, so she had to come up with something by herself. What makes a predator successful at hunt? Well, no one starts off perfectly. "- experience."

The sharp-eyed teacher considered it right, but she saw, that he wasn't done with her yet.

"Sure, an experienced hunter knows how to approach its prey, but I'm

certain you can do better than this, Madeline."

Normally, someone would've already laughed or made a mean remark about the situation, but the students were completely unaware of the professors words. And none of them even looked at Madeline anymore. This wasn't normal. The girl felt herself stiffen nervously over the wooden desk. Was she really the only one seeing this, or was she going crazy? A wide smile extended Mr. Branow's thin mouth, making the crinkles there, and in the corners of his eyes the more evident. That smile wasn't his.

And all of a sudden, the girl knew the right answer. There was just one adequate word.

"Camouflage."

"Good." Yes, that was it. "What the real difficulty is, is to make yourself invisible to the prey. Fool it." He gazed around at the teens, like a shooter aiming his weapon at a target, and started to stroll around, as he carried on with the talk. "To certain species, such ability comes as natural, and these are the most feared ones." The teacher was not a 'Barn Owl' anymore, but a true vulture. Madeline observed in shock as he took a pen, straight from Amanda's hand and began to turn it playfully in his fingers. The girl didn't even flinch. She just sat there, completely calm, while her empty hand still moved rhythmically, writing down the non-existent notes. "Why? Well, I think it's obvious. They won't even know what hit them." He had given Madeline a quick, sly look, before putting the pen in its place. Just like that, the man turned around and continued his speech, like a normal teacher would.

There was no doubt; It was here. But why was It here? And why was she the only one to see It? She didn't know what to think of this bizarre sort of confidentiality between them. It was like if they shared a secret, and, truth be told, as long as the creature didn't kill her, they did. Yet, it made Madeline feel not fear, but excitement.

Stop it, you have to stop! She told herself. *This is disgusting and scary, and there's nothing exciting about it! What happened last night was beyond wrong and you have to stop or you'll be the next one to go missing.*

The whole lesson, she spent on praying for it to be over at last, and she'd probably run out of the classroom along with the ringing bell, but this plan was put down by the aged voice calling her;

"Miss Glave, please stay a while after the class is over. There's something I'd want to discuss."

Madeline did consider sneaking out, but then what difference would it make? If It was willing to get her alone, sooner or later, it would, so why not now, in the bright classroom instead of some darkened corner. Here she could at least feel the illusion of safety. The girl watched with heavy soul as almost thirty people left in a typical hurry, then came up to who was supposed to be Mr. Branow, sitting behind the large writing table.

"Ah, here you are, Madeline." The man said just as if he didn't count the steps she took in his direction, or didn't know exactly how many inches separated them. As if he wasn't able to feel her unsure, racing heart. "I've noticed you've been very distracted lately. Is everything alright? Who's that someone you so profoundly contemplate?" If her throat hadn't been completely dried out, she'd laugh hysterically. Only It could take pleasure in teasing someone like that.

"Quit playing, I know it's you."

"Come on, you're making this less fun. Aren't you gonna play along?"

She wasn't.

"How do you do this? How does no one know?"

"I won't be seen, unless I want to, silly. I can fool them all the way I like." He gave her an innocent little smile.

"Then why am I not fooled? Why do you afflict me, and won't simply put this to an end?"

In one moment, he appeared just behind her, making the girl jump nervously and clench the edges of the desk as she turned around.

"You are the most curious little thing I've ever come across." Madeline saw the aged man's features soften, taking a familiar shape like if

time had reversed itself. His shoulders went straight, hair slowly gained its dark hue. "Although I am sorry for my impulsive behavior yesterday. I just couldn't hold back. My every form has its own needs." Robert was very aware of her reaction to his reveal. It was almost like when she first saw him. Fascination mixed with anxiety smelled just delightful on her. "But I don't think I did anything you'd regret or... dislike." He put both his hands on her sides, and Madeline didn't shrug them off, but just gripped the wooden tabletop tighter. "Did I, Miss Glave?"

"Don't call me that." She said with a slight hint of grief. The man's head tilted in puzzlement and he had to bend a little to look her in the eye.

"And why is that?" Sensing her embarrassment, he knew it was something she hasn't talked about for a long time. Something she kept in secret. "Oh. It reminds you of your father, doesn't it? You don't want to be called by his name. That's interesting. You humans are such sentimental creatures."

Madeline felt bare. He could read her like an open book with all secrets and the most personal thoughts exposed. She could as well be a toy for him to play and enjoy every second of it. She didn't mind as his lips went down to stop just before reaching her neck.

"If it is of any comfort, unlike him, I do not plan to leave anytime soon." Robert whispered, and she didn't protest, when the man's mouth danced across her skin, wetting it with saliva as if the girl was a living candy, or when he growled quietly, taking in her scent.

Don't play with your food, they say. It did, and It did it well.

Meanwhile, in the Public Library Mike Hanlon sat alone behind the counter. This place has become a sort of shelter for him, a safe place where he was spending most of his time. Who would've thought, that the only one, who stayed in this damned town was still afraid. However, this was a different kind of fear; not as immature. His own fate was what the man cared for the least, for he had not much to lose. With that lonely life of his, there was practically nothing else to do but collect thoughts and write them down, while dust covered the

many bookshelves surrounding him.

It seemed like this was just the moment in which he'd finally be able to make a difference. He had to. He promised. Didn't he stay here for only one reason? And now, when the time has finally come, he was scared. The man gazed at the phone just in front of him hesitantly.

All of a sudden, an image of that girl came into his mind. She was the first one in years to show actual interest in what for most was a taboo. She read his album, not just flipped through, but truly *read* it. Did she know? A young mind like hers could do miracles in a fight against the devil, which lived here.

Maybe the situation could be solved differently.

9. Chapter 8

Chapter 8: Murderer

There was a police officer in her house. Only she didn't know that. Not before she'd already closed the front door behind.

"...I really don't want to bother you like this Lynn, but you know how people are..." A muffled male voice came from the living room.

Now, when she thought about it, there was in fact a police car standing in the driveway. Ugh. Had she known better, she would've waited outside, but that was impossible, because her corrupted mind just wouldn't let her think straight. While crossing one street after another on her way back home, the girl felt numb, as if someone had emptied her skull. *Why am I always so weak and insecure? That's pathetic! Is that really the best I can do?* She kept asking herself, disapproving of her own behavior.

"Madeline, you're home! Come here, please." Lynn called.

There was no turning back now. The girl took off her backpack and headed slowly in the right direction. What could the police want with Lynn? Madeline went through the various scenarios in her head in an attempt to remind herself what she should and shouldn't tell if the man asked questions, but there wasn't really anything disreputable about her and her mother's situation now, excluding those late night escapades. If it's only about that, then good. Things used to be much, much worse. She walked in.

"Hi mum, good day sir." She tried to sound calm and well- behaved. Worked out pretty well. The officer nodded.

"What's the matter?" They were sitting at the table since the room was linked with the kitchen to save some space.

"Officer Tacker is here to talk with you, dear. He says maybe you could help with an investigation." She was hiding it very well, but Lynn was definitely worried.

"With me?" Asked Madeline nervously. She was not prepared for this.

"That's right. But there's nothing to worry about, it will only take a while. I want to ask you a couple of questions..." The man's angular face suddenly hardened. Though he wasn't tall beyond average or particularly muscular, his mentality made Arthur Tacker look like a really tough guy. "...about David Harris. I heard you were a close friend of his, and due to what happened throughout the last few days we're trying to find out if anyone's seen anything suspicious."

Madeline bit her lip hesitantly, but then took a seat opposite the officer as she was told to.

"Now, if you wouldn't mind leaving us alone Mrs. Glave." He gave the woman a comforting and yet unarguable look. Lynn didn't want to leave, but understood.

"Of course." Arthur's eyes followed her leaving the room, then returned to the girl.

"We weren't really close, me and David. I mean we were, but that was a while ago and I'm not sure how could I-" She began, but Arthur cut her out with a gesture of his hand.

"You don't need to explain that, not to me anyway. That's not what I'm here for."

"What? But you just said-"

"I had to say something to ease your mother's nerves, that'd be close enough to the truth. I believe I can talk about it freely now that we're alone." Madeline's jaw tensed.

"What is it then?"

The man sighed and fought the urge to run a hand through his short cut hair. He always did that when he was beginning to feel uneasy. *Don't be such a wuss, you're a policeman for God's sake!* Thought Arthur. He shouldn't be doing this and yet, he did.

"Madeline, was it?" He got a brief nod as a reply. "Listen, this is not an investigation, more of a... friendly advice. We both know what

happened to David and his friend." *I do for sure, but you don't Mr. Tacker. You really don't.* "I don't know *how* it happened, and I don't care." *Exactly. So what's your deal?* "The case is; the other two guys, who were with David at that time confirmed to have seen you near the town center a few hours before the incident."

Madeline's chest suddenly felt heavy and her gaze went down. Were they really going to accuse *her* of the murders? But that's ridiculous! How would she manage to rip someone's head off? With her bare hands?

She sat in silence, playing with the blue material of her skirt.

"I know how it sounds, and I'd never believe a girl like you would even think of doing such things, and that's why I'm sharing this with you."

"Is there any... physical proof it was me?" The girl still didn't look him in the eye. The officer hesitated before answering. This was not quite the reaction he'd expected.

"No. Don't get me wrong, you're not technically a suspect, because as I said, there's no investigation and there won't be, but if this information spreads, people are gonna talk. And sometimes that has more maligning consequences than a trial."

Still, Madeline said nothing. Terrible thoughts were swirling inside her head.

"What were you even doing there? Out? At night?" He wasn't saying this as an interrogator, but as a genuinely worried person. It seemed like he really wanted to help, but the girl had the strange feeling that nothing could truly help her now.

"Nothing really. Went out for a walk." She lied. Arthur nodded. He said he wasn't going to pry, and he meant it.

"The more reason you should start looking for a good alibi."

"Why do you care, officer?" Just then she decided to look at him, and it was a look of a lost, yet determined child.

"I..." He began, as if he'd forgot that there were things he was not allowed to say. All those little facts and pieces of emotions were expressed in one brief look to the door through which Lynn has left. "...I just care."

The conversation was over, and while officer Tacker got up to leave Madeline didn't stop him. The man would've left just like that if the girl didn't turn to say something just as he was standing at the doorstep.

"Thank you." It was a simple message, but there was just no other way to put it into words. Any kind of showed understanding or support was appreciated deeply by her. Even if in this case it was about to bring no good. Seconds before Arthur went out, his eyes lingered on her neck, where her sweater went down a couple of inches. He saw it. The bruise was fading slowly and didn't look as wretched as before, but she knew he saw it.

Apparently Madeline wasn't the only one to know about Mr. Tacker's thing for her mother. Sandra Tacker knew it from the very beginning. Whether she liked it or not, she was a very observant girl and sometimes noticed things she shouldn't have. And the popularity in school that has given her could hardly be considered as a compensation. For some time now she's been blaming the woman for her parents' separation and the bitterness she felt turned her against Madeline, making Sandra truly hate the girl. By talking behind her back and spreading rumors, more or less truthful, she made sure there was no one who'd stand up for Madeline and succeeded, but when she saw how well she dealt with it, it only caused more suppressed anger towards the girl. So, she's been waiting for an opportunity to release it, and now came just the perfect one. It would be a waste not to use such an affair.

Throughout the next day, it was hard not to notice all the strange, leery glances directed at Madeline in the school corridor. Her alienation was not a new thing, but even Madeline wasn't used to such impudence. It made her feel sick, it made her feel miserable, and she couldn't stand it. She'd rather be lonely her whole life than get through one day more, treated like that. The girl still hoped that there was another reason and it wasn't about the death of those two

boys, but everything became clear when she saw her locker from across the hall and the word 'MURDERER' written across it with red paint. She wanted to scream. She wanted to run off and bury herself under the ground. *Who? Who did this?* But Madeline already knew. Who else if not the daughter of a police officer.

She found her on the second floor, hanging out in a larger group as always, laughing and chatting as if nothing happened. Madeline paid no mind to the wary stares as she jostled through them, approaching Sandra with clenched fists.

"What did I ever do to you?" Asked the girl a bit louder than necessary.

"To me? Nothing." It was impressive how she was still able to keep up the act. Madeline was not to be provoked by the blonde's little smile.

"Why do you hate me so? If you've got a problem, then you should confront me by yourself."

"OK, calm down, Maddie-"

"No! And don't call me that. If I'm a murderer, then I'll tell you who *you* are." Her tone was powerful, and sounded unfamiliar. She couldn't remind herself when she last spoke to anyone this way. "You'd be nothing without them." The girl gestured at the circle of curious eyes, that's formed around. "You're a coward."

Madeline didn't cry or weep out of self-pity, but simply sat with arms hugging her knees, closed in one of the cabins, eyes dry. It's already been more than half an hour, but she didn't really care about the classes or... anything. At least it was quiet there.

I can't go on like this. There's gotta be a way to make it stop. There's gotta be. And I have to do this. But how?

The ground was cold and the atmosphere heavy. She counted the quiet beats of her heart to calm down, but instead she suddenly felt dizzy and claustrophobic. Standing up unsteadily, she finally left the cabin and walked up to the sink. The cold water on her face felt

relieving, but when she looked up to meet her own gaze in the mirror, she was all red and didn't really look too well.

Do I really have to do this alone?

And just as the thought ran through her mind, another face appeared on the glass surface behind her. That damned, gorgeous face.

"Is there anything troubling you, dear?" He teased getting a few steps closer, his green eyes shining with amusement as usual.

"You already know, don't you?" It was hard to name what she was feeling towards him now. Things can get quite complicated, when you have no one to turn to.

"You do really ask a lot of unnecessary questions. Of course, I do." Robert placed one unruly strand of her hair behind her ear, but she didn't turn to face him

"And you only ask them if you already know the answer."

"My precious, little murderer." The man paid no mind to the hurt in her voice and mindlessly caressed her shoulders. "It's okay now, I'm here. I can protect you. I can take care of that Tacker girl. Wouldn't even hesitate to murder the whole town if you wanted me to." It was bizarre how sweet and comforting he could sound, while saying such horrible things. It was also bizarre that the girl didn't oppose at first, and for a brief moment even considered his words. The situation was just so unfair, it almost seemed unreal. To turn the whole school against one person? And bear no consequences? What if she *did* want him to take care of Sandra? What if... *No, no, no.*

"No! It's you! It's all because of you!" Madeline shouted in rage and her clenched fist hit against the mirror, breaking it. Pieces of shattered glass had cut her skin like blades before rattling onto the ground. She stood there motionless as if deafened by the sound, not feeling the pain yet. Robert caught her injured hand in the air impetuously dragging her back from the sharp slivers scattered all over. But when he felt the red liquid from her palm on his own, a chill ran through him. He let go of her abruptly and just couldn't stop staring intensively at the blood on and in between his fingers. Its

vivid color hypnotized him and made his senses converge. Madeline saw his irises flush bright yellow and that's when she knew she had to run. Staying just a while longer would definitely cost her much more than a couple drops of blood.

She stormed out of the girls' bathroom and into the empty hall, not looking back.

All sweaty and distressed, with eyes wide and one sleeve dappled with red — that's how the librarian saw her when she came up to the counter. She didn't have to say anything, in fact, he's been expecting her.

A/N: Hi everyone! So this is where things start to get real and I have to admit, I had planned a really dark, sad ending, but thanks to a lovely review I got from a Guest, I might actually change it. There is hope ;) Let me know if you like the story so far! xx

10. Chapter 9

Chapter 9: To Kill is to Save a Life

Warm steam wafting from the red mug took many beautiful shapes, blending lazily in the air. He'd offered her hot chocolate before she took a seat next to him and Madeline agreed thankfully. Along with the drink, he brought a bandage for the gashes on her palm, and as he was swathing the small hand, she was still a bit shaky. The girl was silent and unsure at first, and he gave her time, he knew exactly how it was to be one of the few that have actually faced It and got away in one piece. While Mike was focused at bandaging her injury, the girl was trying to gain the courage to finally open up about the things she's been hiding, to talk about what she's been dealing with recently. *But how can I be sure if he really knows? Is that album enough of a proof? What if he doesn't? What if he doesn't believe me and I'll only make a fool of myself?* The fact that Mike Hanlon was a complete stranger did not make things easier. But he was helping her, right? She had not much to lose.

"I suppose, that you're here because there's something you wanted to talk about." He began, meaning to make it easier for her. "Something completely irrational and out of this world." Her eyes rose up, brightened with hope. Maybe he indeed understood. "You know, when I was about your age, a little younger actually, I saw things too. Disturbing things. It was like a bad dream, but... real. Utterly real."

"What did you see?"

"It wasn't just me. There were seven of us. We formed a sort of club, called ourselves 'The Losers'." The words left a nostalgic smile on his lips. "I guess the only two things we had in common were that each of us was an outcast, and we all knew about the creature we called 'It'; an Evil Thing, that lives under the streets of Derry and feeds off of human fear, but I assume you already know that. It wanted to take us down one by one, taking a different shape each time, but we've all seen the Clown." It was hard for Mike to bring those faint, yet very much alive memories up, but he needed to be strong to give her the strength she needed right now. And, when he thought about it, there

were still so many things he'd never manage to say...

"Yeah, I saw him too." Madeline said staring blankly into the distance. "He murdered a boy right before my eyes. But to me It always comes as human." She took a sip of her drink. The warmth really was comforting.

"Human?" The man seemed a bit surprised, but then thought: *But there are many people to be afraid of. For Bev, it was her father.* "Someone you know or..?"

"No, no it's just It. It's human shape, I believe. He referred to himself as Robert Gray." Saying it out loud, the girl felt a stab of guilt, as if she was betraying him. Mike however, got deeply confused.

"That's odd." His black, usually mild eyebrows furrowed in thought. "It can find countless ways to get what it wants, that's for sure. You're very clever you didn't fall for its tricks."

Well, I wouldn't necessarily say so...

"But how did you fight it? How did you make It stop? Because you did, right?"

"Oh yes, we did. In fact, until the last weekend, I was almost certain we've defeated it." The man got closer and bent slightly to look her directly in the eye, taking a more serious tone. "You see, the thing with that creature is, you have to show it you're not afraid. That it doesn't have the power over you. You need to overcome your fear and use it against It."

"But why me?" Asked Madeline hopelessly. She didn't feel overpowering at all.

"Sometimes things in this town just are as they're meant to be. I'm sure you can do it. You're young." The girl wasn't very happy about it, but nodded.

She stayed a while more, finishing her chocolate but time went on relentlessly and soon enough she had to go. She thanked the librarian and he even led her off to the door.

"If anything goes wrong I will call for help. Good luck, Madeline." The girl gave him a brief, questioning look, knowing they didn't really make a proper introduction to each other, but he just chuckled under his breath. "Don't worry, I don't have any mind controlling powers, I just checked your library card."

"Oh, um, right." Madeline smiled shyly at her own distrustfulness, and remembered that she also checked the plaque standing on the counter. "Thank you once again Mr. Hanlon."

And that was it.

She didn't stumble through her things in search for something adequate to her task, for she knew exactly what she needed and where it was kept. The girl had decided that whatever she was going to do, she had to begin right now, otherwise her determination would weaken, and she might eventually change her mind. There was only one thing she wanted to take with her. Cleverly hidden, stuck up with tape underneath the bottom of a drawer, was a shiny revolver. It wasn't notably large or bulky because it was bought to be handled by a woman, and so it has been, a long time ago.

When Madeline took it in her hand and felt how well it fitted, a strange sensation crept up her spine. Was she really ready to use it? The last time she's seen it, it was held by Lynn and pointed at her father. Overcome your fear and use it against It, that's how the librarian put it. This had been an object of great fear, before Madeline's parents parted ways. Although Lynn never used it in a threatening way, little Madeline was always afraid that one day it would just accidentally fire, and release all the deadly power it's been carrying inside. Since it's never been used by her, now was the first time, the girl looked at it differently. True, the revolver could bring death, but it also could save hundreds of lives. But why did these two attributes always needed to come inseparably?

I am about to kill. I don't want to, God knows I really don't, but I have to.

I have to.

With pained heart, she made sure it was loaded, and put the gun behind the belt of her blue skirt.

To her terrible disappointment, nothing stopped her on the way. Even the delicate wind blows seemed to push her subtly towards the Barrens, and before she knew it, Madeline crossed the grassy path, then the river, and the large, hollow tunnel stood open right before her eyes. One of the entries to the sewers. Just now she realized, she could've put on a pair of solid boots instead of the material trainers.

Here we go. It's now or never. Thought the girl and with one, long, splashy step found herself inside. She went on slowly, careful not to slip on the muddy surface. The air was musty to say the least, and the walls filthy, so she had nothing to steady herself with and not get dirt all over. With all the unpleasant surroundings, still atmosphere and only the light from the round gratings above, Madeline felt just like in the dream she had the other night. Her eyes scanned the darkness restlessly, but there was nothing to be seen, so she carried on, getting more and more tense with each step. She picked the turns randomly, without any particular strategy, but apparently they led her in the right (or, as one may think, the wrong) direction, because after what seemed to be an endless walk, the round passageway opened to a much larger area. Was that the center? Madeline didn't know that yet, but before she reached the end of the tunnel, a crunching sound hit her ears from the distance. Her whole body trembled and she struggled not to make a noise. She's heard it before. The sound was interrupted by another one; a ripping of material, then went on incessantly.

Don't you dare panic now! You mustn't be afraid! You've dealt with him a good amount of times before, you can do it.

Collecting all the courage her fragile, human body could contain, she made it to the opening and stood there in dimmed light, mesmerized by what she saw. It was indeed the center of the sewer system, and furthermore — It's lair. In the middle of this gigantic, underground location there was an old circus wagon literally flooded with a pile of all kinds of old, abandoned objects, but that wasn't what made Madeline's jaw drop. She mindlessly came closer, lured in by the sight of the floating bodies. And what shocked her even more was, she recognized two of them. They levitated up there, out of reach, almost peaceful. One was headless, the other had his chest pierced inside out.

A loud creak from not so far at all brought the girl back to reality rather abruptly, and her eyes momentarily scanned the crouching silhouette, a few feet away. It was, and, at the same time wasn't him. It was the Clown. He was turned aback from her, so she couldn't see his face, but as soon as she acknowledged just what he was doing, Madeline realised she didn't really want to see. Beneath him laid a small body of a girl, whose face was being frantically consumed right here, right now. Before Madeline could even think of holding it back, before her palm went up to cover her mouth, she'd let out a terrified squeal, regretting it immediately. The creature froze, and so all the crunches and growls ceased. The girl watched as it shrugged off, with a couple of bell jiggles, and when It sluggishly turned to face her, she managed to see a couple of large teeth recoiling back into its mouth. Just a second ago there was more, that is certain.

"Madeline! What a surprise!" He exclaimed, fresh blood dripping from the corners of his mouth and onto the already stained collar. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" Fake. Fake, fake, fake. This voice was just beaming with false enthusiasm, while the golden eyes held pure malice within them. He straightened up, and she examined the aged, but surprisingly rich fabric of his costume. She's never had the opportunity to take a good look at this appearance, which despite the horror it was designed for, was oddly alluring. "I should've seen this coming sooner or later, but definitely not *this* soon. You see, darling, you approached me at a very wrong time." There was a brief shift in the Clown's features, as if he was trying to change again, with no result. His eyes flickered green for a second, and it was a helpless shade of green, screaming *Run while you still can!*. Had she not come here for a reason, she would've listened. "Curiosity killed the cat, they say. I wonder what will happen to you."

It started to move around the girl in circles, making it harder for her to focus and finally take an action. The faceless body was left on the filthy ground. Madeline didn't know what happened after she'd left the girls' bathroom, didn't see as he starkly captured that little girl directly from the school's backyard, wasn't aware that while feasting he thought only of her, whose blood still stuck to his palm.

"Reckless child, why did you come? What makes you stand still, while I could end your life in an instant? Do you really want your

own doom?" For this question, Madeline knew her answer.

I can see past the monster. You fascinate me unlike anything I've ever come across, and I've grown attached to your affection. I want someone's embrace to secure me from the rest of the world, and I want it to be yours, but such thing would be forbidden even to dream about, and so I have to commit to what's meant to be. I have to kill you.

"I'm not afraid of you."

The Clown's eyebrows went up in a mock of disbelief.

"Really?" With that, he came closer, stopping just before the red pom-poms brushed against her shirt, and sniffed her hair. "You smell... different. Somewhat familiar, dare I say." His eyes scanned her up and down, shining a bit lighter, when they noticed the bandage. "Ooh! I see. You've met an old friend of mine." A sudden, high-pitched laugh filled Madeline's ears, and she moved away, gaining back her personal space. "He was a funny one, that Mikey boy." It managed to say in between the maniacal bursts of laughter. "And whatever he's told you, is probably true."

The girl's breathing was shallow, her legs felt numb like wooden sticks. With a great difficulty, she reached for the revolver, then held it up, aiming at the Clown's chest. He didn't mind. He was having the time of his life.

"And you believed him! Well, that 'is' a surprise. Who would've thought that the old bastard would finally achieve something. He didn't get me last time, so now he's using you." Then, in the middle of his monologue, he rushed forward in an otherworldly pace, crashing into Madeline, all in a split-second. Suddenly, the whole world rolled back, the water splashed, and she was laying on the cold ground, with the creature creeping over her, lucky she didn't let go of the gun.

"So how's this gonna be, huh? You're just going to shoot me?" She didn't understand. She didn't understand any of it. "Go ahead. Do it." He said a bit quieter now, wrapping a large, glowed hand around the gun's barrel, directing it to his forehead. "Do it now, there won't be a better occasion." Her hands were steady, as well as the finger around

the trigger, but seconds passed, and she was still struggling with making that one, simple action. The inscrutable look in It's face... There was just so much more than madness to it.

"I-I'm not.." She began with a shaky voice, hoping it would make things clearer, like a magic spell. "I'm not afraid." Her grip on the gun tightened, but not enough yet.

"Oh, I know you're not, dear." He said, giving her a look filled with a feeling she couldn't name. "You never really were, your curiosity was always stronger. That's why you're different. You're brave enough not to fear me, and yet you don't have the desire to kill. You don't want to. You don't."

And yet, she did. The things we do are quite often not the ones we want.

His head flew backwards. The gun slipped off her hands, while the bang resounded through the nearby tunnels. She waited for his muscles to ease, the body fall to the side, or for whatever happens when an entity ceases at its existence, but no such thing came. With sheer panic Madeline felt his hands crawling up to pin hers down, and just then she knew she'd screwed up. Convulsions took over his head, neck and torso, when some invisible force dragged the bullet out of the Clown's cracked skull. The small object didn't fall, but floated off. The girl tried to squirm out of his grip, but it was of no use. With this shot, she'd condemned herself to the monster, and there was no point in escaping now. Slowly, very slowly, he turned to look down at her, his mouth filled with dozens of pointed teeth.

"You never cease to impress me, little one. Did you really think this would work?" The grip on her wrists pressed tighter, harder than a clamp. "It seems that impudent, little coward managed to turn my precious girl against me." He spat, driven by fury mixed with hurt. He was hiding it well, but it pained him. That's what he got for being careful, for playing the game fairly. But it was all going to change now. "And he will pay for this, believe me he will, but first I'm going to fix what he's been trying to spoil. I'll take back what's mine. Because you're mine, aren't you?"

He drew his face to hers until she could see only his golden eyes and

the dark smudges of paint around them.

"Meet Pennywise the Dancing Clown. He doesn't like to be betrayed."

11. Chapter 10

Chapter 10: A Work of Art

Her body trembled underneath his huge silhouette. No one plays with fire without getting burnt one way or another. If she thought she's already seen the worst of Pennywise, she was terribly wrong. It could all go much smoother, little by little, but she was giving him no choice. Every inch of her belonged to It now, and It was about to prove it. Mark it. He was going to make her forget about the whole wide world, until there's only his power in her mind. He'd show her what is power. He'd show her control. But he needed both hands free for that. The thick material on the Clown's back gave in as two accessory limbs had emerged, growing from his spine, long and angular like a spider's. They pierced her sleeves like huge pins and Madeline was scared as never before, tussling, trying to kick him off of her, but he didn't even flinch.

"Now, where should I begin?" Teased Pennywise, removing his grip from her wrists to her throat, touching the almost healed bruise deliberately. "No, I've already been here." He went lower, with face mere inches away from her body, and came dangerously close to the girl's frantically beating heart. The rhythm of blood rumbling in such haste was like the finest melody to his ears. He ripped the cleavage of her shirt down to the ribs, taking Madeline's muffled cry with pleasure. Suddenly, fingers of the monster's right hand grew almost twice as long, because of the claws oozing out of his flesh. Bringing one to her chest, just in between her breasts, the creature watched as she momentarily stopped breathing, going completely still. 'You're a smart girl. But that's not going to help you this time.' He was savouring the moment, feeling as the sensitive tissues parted under the sharp edge. With one, firm pull he cut into her skin, making a long red line down the breastbone and smiled viciously, when a silent scream left her throat.

"Yes, little one. Scream all the way you like. Scream until your lungs go dry, no one's gonna hear you." She only managed to whine, as something wet and snake-like slithered on her skin, licking off the

blood flowing from the cut. He's been waiting for this for so long, the taste was irresistible. Sweet like ripe fruit, like molten honey, like sugary syrup. Grabbing her by the ribs, Pennywise drew in closer with a groan, and sucked into the wound hungrily. Madeline's legs curled, and she didn't feel much pain, but numbness and a strange tingling, not just under his touch but also inside. Feeling his lips move there in a certain way brought an unusual emotion upon her. Dread and panic mixed with... something else. Only she didn't know what was it yet. Although the girl did not give up on trying to free her wrists, after a while, she eased a little, though the tingling only rose, beginning to really hurt. Her mood didn't go unnoticed for the bloody kiss started relocating to various places, leaving red traces on her skin. Every time his teeth brushed against the area, a shiver crept down her spine.

"Lost the fighting spirit so soon? Tsk-tsk." The Clown murmured, wandering up to examine her face again. "Maybe I haven't determined you enough." Seeing his entire jaw blotted with her own blood, Madeline felt like she was going to faint, but she wasn't given such opportunity. Pennywise's claws scraped their way down her side and hesitated around the hip. He wasn't done yet, and she was way more fun when she tried to resist him. It wanted to see the spark, that panic rising in the girl's features, and was not disappointed. The eyes gazing at him weakly, bolted open with alarm, then widened even more, as she realized how it hurt to take a deeper breath. She couldn't see it, but the upper area of her shirt was practically drenched in blood.

"Oh, how I adore that look of yours... Sweet, sweet girl. You're mine." In a couple seconds, that sweet girl was about to get to know the disadvantages of wearing a skirt. It was torture. Pure torture. She tugged at her sleeves again. "I knew it since I first laid eyes on you. You. Are. Mine." She felt the sharp spots on her thigh and winced, while he was gloating over her expression. "Say it."

Oh no, she was *not* going to say it. The girl just clenched her jaws in a silent act of defiance. *I won't let It have this satisfaction.*

The Clown groped her leg fiercely, nails digging into her flesh. It seemed like neither of them was going to drop it. "Say it. Say it out loud!"

She didn't. Growling at the girl warningly, Pennywise hiked her leg up and pressed to her as close as he could.

"I wouldn't risk it if I were you." He teased, but deep down inside knew that even if she did as he ordered, he wouldn't hesitate to go further, oh no. The warmth of Madeline's flesh against his own and in between his teeth was all he cared for right now. Just when the claws dug in deeper, her sleeve tore up at last and she swung the freed hand towards the monster's painted face to strike it. Unfortunately, it dropped lifelessly halfway through along with her whole body going slightly loose. Why? The blood loss had dried her completely off of the energy and strength. She suddenly felt dizzy, and wasn't even looking at him no more, but towards the light, struggling to keep on breathing. There was a moment of stillness between the two. He stopped, realizing that in a minute Madeline was truly going to pass out. It might have forgotten just how weak humans were since he's never intended to spare one. The predatory part of him was obstinately urging him to go on and satisfy the craving, that burned inside, but... His body shifted carefully, and those huge spikes began to recoil back, releasing the girl. It was a ridiculous thought, but the creature wasn't really sure what to do. Just now he put it under consideration. What was he going to do with her? What has been done was done, the situation was a point of no return. Like a beautifully bizarre painting, she was exposed on the ground; a delicate figure layered over cruelly with small nicks and scratches, all dominated by the one, which marked her core.

A strange thought enlightened Pennywise's mind. An idea. A completely bonkers one but just as tempting. Dipping the tip of his claw in the liquid, he created his own brush, and brought it to her face. Starting on the left corner of the girl's mouth he drew a smooth, red line that sheered off under the eyelid, up her pale cheek, and then a short, pointed one above the eyebrow. Madeline hardly paid any attention to the Clown's actions, so he made the second, symmetrical one. Now she truly was a work of art. His work of art. Surprising, that just now he noticed the similarity in her eyes — bright eyes, that always had a hint of gold in them. The sparkle was dimmed, but at times it would glow lighter than his own with no eternal power hidden inside.

The idea of losing her filled It with sudden worry. One could think it was the very first time It felt that way, and it was a feeling stronger than hunger.

Driven with the new emotion, he sat her up gently so no more blood would be spilled. Then held her weak body securely in his arms. She was just as limp as a ragged doll.

"It's alright, it's alright. I won't let this be." Pennywise whispered, face buried in her hair. "I don't want to lose you."

Madeline's never thought it would come to this, but from the distant place she's found herself in, somewhere between consciousness and daze, she heard those words filling her head and soul. In the most absurd way possible they gave her comfort, and just before she passed out, the girl almost imperceptibly returned his gesture.

It happened in happened rather differently than she'd ever expect, under tragic, violent circumstances but, despite all, she got a hint of what she's been longing for.

When the darkness finally swallowed her, she was dreaming. Dreaming of herself. Her lips moving inaudibly, pronouncing one sentence over and over again.

I'm yours, I'm yours, I'm yours...

This is taking too long. This is taking way too long. I shouldn't have let her go by herself. How selfish does one have to be to put another's life at risk to save their own! Cowardly, irresponsible moron! Mike paced nervously in his bedroom. It was 3 in the morning, and he still hasn't slept one bit. It has gotten to the point in which there was no other thought in his mind but Madeline's unfortunate fate.

Maybe she's just lost, even we were lost and couldn't find the way out. Things like this happen, and the sewer system is practically a maze, so it's possible that she's just on the wrong track, but then of course she's completely alone! Oh what on Earth was I thinking... And on he went, choking up with guilt and regret. The image of the Losers safe at their homes, wherever they were, had blinded him, and now he had to

face the consequences. He knew there was not much time left, and if objects could speak, the telephone on the nightstand would probably be screaming at him. The man could almost hear that little blatant voice saying: 'Come on! Grab that damned handset! With It still inhabiting this planet their existences would be incomplete anyway! Just use me already! Wasn't it you who said things happen as they're meant to? Huh, Mike?'

Trying to shut his imagination down (because it was just his imagination, right?) Mike buried his face in his palms. He's just been in this cursed town for too long. Maybe it's driven him insane, maybe...

Then, he heard a couple of splashy steps come by. Thinking it was only his exhausted mind playing tricks on him again, the man did not look up at first, but the sound seemed so authentic, so clear and haunting, he just had to. What appeared before his eyes, made the man's mouth go wide agape in horror. First, there was a pair of soaked trainers, one untied. Then, two dirty, pallid legs, unnaturally thin as if they were bones alone. A blue skirt turned brown, a shirt ripped in half revealing a revolting, deadly wound and pus leaking from it's torn edges. But the most direful was her face. From underneath the mess of tousled locks beamed an absent gaze. She was dried out of life.

Mike's legs went stiff like arid sticks, and he felt sick just from the sight. The horrid imitation of what was supposed to be Madeline stared blankly at him, through him and into him.

A scream was caught in his throat. Only the repetitive drops of water trickling down her arms loosely hanging on her sides. Seconds turned to hours, and the man was still paralyzed, not daring to move even when she spoke. Especially when she spoke.

"What, are you afraid now, Mike? You're worried *now*? Should've been worrying *before* you sent me away to encounter the being you were too scared to face yourself!" The girl spat at him with contempt. "Look at me now. I said look at me! Look at what you've done! This is your fault!" She started to sob, crying her eyes out with bloody tears.

Mike fell to his knees, grounded by the emotional weight of it all, like

a sinner before the altar. That awful sensation. He was breathing it in like a scent. It smelled of filth and violence. Hasn't he felt it before?

Indeed, he did, and the realization hasn't come to him until Madeline's sobs transformed into a genuinely amused laughter. Her tone became low and rough. Not hers.

It.

"Ah Mike, Mike, Mike... Did you really fall for this?" That lifeless corpse was just It's puppet. It was hiding behind a mask as always. "Ha! You're even weaker than I'd expected. It's a relief I hesitated, because now I think killing you'd be just a waste of time. I almost pity you." Those big, now golden, eyes and a crooked grin directed at him warningly. It was still there, still powerful.

"I have to say thank you, for making her come to me at her own will. I hope you didn't expect she'd defeat me all by herself, because that'd be ridiculous even to think of. Right, Mikey?" Then, as It gave another malicious laugh, the lights went out and the man's heart was beating so fast, it should've jumped out of his chest by now. He got up hastily, trying to figure out the surroundings, but was fiercely interrupted by a grip of a huge hand on his throat. Mike gagged, grasping for air, but the grip was firm.

"Now, listen up, you lout." The same, ferocious voice hissed from the darkness. "Don't ever try to mess with me again. Don't you dare to even think of it. And if you will, I assure you, I'll drive you insane, and then I'll kill you all. I'll be tearing you up, piece by piece until there's nothing left of you, understood?" Even if Mike wished to answer, he just wasn't able to. "Oh, and one more thing. Forget about the girl.

She's mine."

And just like that It was gone like a mist or an echo or a dreadful promise. The shaken up man ran straightly towards his nightstand, almost tripping on his own feet.

Six calls were made. Six were answered. Five brought the desired

results, and five people left their homes, but with no ease whatsoever. Four of them were men and one was a woman, all of them grown up, and yet the same as twenty-seven years ago. Before they'd unite, back in their hometown, almost two days were supposed to fly by, and they had only one enemy to defeat, with hundreds of lives to save. There was supposed to be a special one, but none of them knew about it yet. Somewhere there, in the dark, one, young heart pounded in a rhythm different than theirs.

12. Chapter 11

Chapter 11: Hope

It wasn't completely dark. It wasn't cold or humid either. There was something notably more comfortable than bare floor underneath her and the atmosphere wasn't filled with the stink of ordure. Well, at least not as much. Madeline was slowly making it out of the state of utter numbness, and her senses weren't at focus yet, however the blunt pain in her chest was sorely clear. Adrenaline had eased it out before, but now she really felt how hurtful was what's been done to her. What 'he's done to her. Or maybe her own naivete had brought it upon her. Or was it the librarian with his advices and convincing talk?

The girl could blame really anyone and everyone, but she was too weak and just genuinely tired of all this. As if it hasn't been enough that her feelings were a mess, now her body was also a mess. It couldn't have gone any worse, could it? At least she was alive, the pain was enough of a proof.

She waited to gain back the control over her limbs, and bit by bit, she began to feel like herself again, not just some plastic integument. Sadly, when she thought about it, it was clear that she didn't really want to wake up yet. In the darkness she was safe, and here? It was impossible to tell what was awaiting her.

Trying to push away the anxiety, Madeline opened her eyes warily, and to her surprise, she wasn't laying abandoned in one of the tunnels, but in a secure, closed space lit subtly with candlelight. One couldn't really call it a room, it was more like a huge, wooden box, and it took her a while to finally state she was apparently inside the wagon she saw earlier. And as far as the girl could tell, it resembled a stage. There were two thick curtains folded to the sides, a parquet and some sort of machinery on the ceiling like in a theater, plus the old mattress Madeline was currently laying on, along with many props tossed carelessly onto the floor around.

The girl was still unable to move much, so she only scanned the

surroundings blankly. The large wooden doors to on the right were surely closed. She wouldn't make it there anyway, for even sitting up seemed like a great effort. Getting up wouldn't be a good idea with a giant wound like hers. The wound!

Madeline attempted to check herself in panic, wondering why the hell hasn't she thought about it earlier, but what she found was quite... different from what she'd imagined. First of all, her chest had been tightly bound up with a dressing enveloping her like a corset. Same about the marked thigh. Second, her clothing changed. It was hard for her to believe at first, but she was wearing a dress. And not an ordinary one. Of course, it's been worn before, torn in certain places and not necessarily clean, but some time ago it must've been beautiful.

Simple, but very graceful, full sleeves, bodice cut elegantly with subtle ornaments around the cleavage, and skirt flowing down in a long, silky wave that covered even the tips of her toes. It's whiteness has given place to a slightly grayish color long ago, but even now the girl could feel how expensive the material was. However, nothing pleased her like the fact that it was warm and comfy. After all, anything was better than a ripped shirt and soaked skirt, but... What was this supposed to mean? From the still hazy pit of her memories, she pulled out the one of the embrace. Everything was blurry in her mind except those words. *I don't want to lose you.* Did he really not?

Madeline tried to imagine them in that moment, but it was a very strange picture. It looked almost as if a cat was hugging a mouse.

And where was he? What was he doing while not being here, in his lair? Terrorizing someone? Probably yes. Just as if he was aware she's been thinking of him, the door unlocked, and the girl momentarily closed her eyes, pretending to be asleep. For the first twenty seconds there was nothing. Silence. She didn't even notice as he got close.

"Madeline, I... I..." He whispered almost inaudibly. Another dose of silence. He sounded so helpless, so concerned. She shut her eyes tighter. Maybe it was a confession, she wasn't supposed to hear. Then, the most unexpected thing of all had place.

"I... I'm sorry."

And then he left.

Everything in Pennywise was devilish; the redness of his hair and the murderous smile. Those predatory eyes and shape shifting power. And yet, can a demon apologize? Is the devil able to show acts of mercy?

The next day, she woke up alone again, and just a moment after her sight had adapted to the dimmed candlelight, she noticed one particular object among the many circus-like contraptions, which was neatly placed to her side. A toy just slightly bigger than the palm of her hand, shaped meticulously as a carousel. Small, but oddly majestic, it seemed to be waiting for the girl to reach it. Madeline knew only one thing; they weren't making toys like this anymore. Not even as a child did she remember to have seen such an enchanting, homemade piece. Not caring if it was placed there for a reason, she took it, noticing her limbs weren't so naggingly stiff no more.

Madeline examined it like a treasure noticing more and more details covering the tiny wooden horses, and just admired the old-fashioned design. The reason as to why it appeared special to her, was that it brought memories. The happy ones, when Robert was mysterious and alluring, but still just Robert, who she'd convinced to ride alongside her, in a horse-like seat in the middle of the night. She smiled sadly. There was a small crank at the bottom, and she turned it right away. Surprisingly, the music box inside still worked, and the carousel started to spin to a melody, the girl knew all too well, but couldn't tell exactly where from. *Oranges and lemons...*

Those lines could be as well put into every breath she took; just as naturally she was able to recite them. It is often said, that one's heart aches of longing or despair, but Madeline always thought it just a poetic metaphor, and yet she was feeling it now quite literally. 'If only time could be reversed, then...' Exactly. What then? She tried to come up with a reasonable continuation to her wish, but there was none. She would go with him again. And again, and again.

Lost in thought, the girl didn't acknowledge a clown face peeking inside the wagon. The large door opened with an unpleasant creak, making her flinch and put the toy aside. The moment of lonely

nostalgia she had, was over. Instead of directing her attention at Pennywise, she gazed intensively at his shadow, refusing to look up. His every step was followed by the dainty jingling, and he did not come close. The shadow just brushed her mattress and stopped there, changing its shape as he crouched down.

Be strong. He can't do much worse than he already did. You should despite him. You should be resentful.

"Whatever it is you came for... just get on with it." She stated flatly, trying to give away no emotions. Pennywise sighed, sounding somewhat broken. For what was to say in a situation like this? Dealing with rage or fear, or any intense emotion was easier than dealing with insensibility. But as seconds went on, the atmosphere became unbearably thick, and she decided to make a move.

"Just why did you come?" The girl asked, lifting herself up on her elbows, and focused her stare at him, letting all the pain and misery be expressed. "What are you now? My captor? My caregiver or my persecutor?"

Now he was the one to look away. The warm light has softened his features. Unlike before, the Clown was presentably clean, and while he sat there, in a safe distance, she saw perfectly the constant inner fight in his face.

"You know what I am. I'm a monster. Nothing more." Maybe it wasn't just the light. Was he... sad? "I know it proves nothing, but I swear I wouldn't have lost control had you not come to me just then. And it is not a normal thing for me to restrain. But I try. For you." The last sentence was barely a whisper, and Madeline could hardly believe in what she was seeing. Pennywise was embarrassed of his words, and to think about it, it really was a miracle that she was still alive. The girl was biting her lip so hard, trying to control her words, that in a couple seconds she began to feel a metallic taste spreading in her mouth.

You're mad at him, you have to. Don't lose your spirit. He's a monster. It's a monster, and you have to fight. You shouldn't be feeling any different, it's wrong. It's wrong, it's wrong, it's wrong...

"I don't understand you. Once you try to eat me alive, and now... Do you enjoy this? Messing people up? Hurting them from inside?" She asked, sounding just as broken as him.

"People — yes. You? No." A simple answer, giving off the very essence of his emotional state, as the confusion in the color of his irises, which were now blue.

"How so? You threatened me, you cut me up and fed like an animal!"

"I did."

"Not for a second had you hesitated. You almost made me die!"

"I did."

"Do you really expect me to trust any word you say?"

"I don't. I never said you should. You turned against me, and I was furious, I was truly *mad*." And here he was, Pennywise — the Eater of Worlds — explaining himself to an adolescent human being. It looked just as weird as it sounds, but at the same time it was just a very limited version of what he wanted to say.

But if you won't turn your back at me again, I promise to keep on trying. You are like an anchor, that makes me hold back, which gives me a purpose to continue this damned existence of mine, please don't throw me away. He'd never admit it out loud.

Madeline didn't know if she was irritated or just completely lost. The situation was hopeless.

"I hate you." She whispered. "I hate you so much." It wasn't true. She hated herself for not hating him.

"Don't... say that."

"I do! And I'm scared of you!" Why did he have to be so comforting, so calm, when she needed him to be otherwise?

"No. No, you're not. This much I know. You are not scared of me, you proved it well. Besides, I see it in your eyes, I can sense it in your

scent. You can hate me, you can be filled with anger or regret, but you're not scared of me." He was right.

"I should. I should be scared." Said Madeline quietly, more to herself than to her interlocutor, slowly giving up her act. The girl raised her gaze at the creature in front of her, which was still a great mystery to her, and just couldn't help, but wonder:

"What made you like this? Why are you even here?" She asked, searching for something to hold onto, to make her be able to define her feelings right now.

It hesitated before saying anything. This was a question no one's ever heard the true answer to. And to reveal it to a human seemed unsuitable to say the least, but maybe it could make things easier. She deserved to know.

"I had been here before any human soul traced the grounds of this town." It picked its words carefully. "I came from outer space, having no particular form or shape, with an insatiable hunger, that could only be satisfied by human fear. Throughout the centuries, I made myself at home, feeding off the inhabitants of Derry, which wasn't very difficult. People have a strange tendency to disclaim the things they don't want to acknowledge. I am the last one of my kind, that's why I remain here." Madeline watched him from the distance, doing her best to take what seemed like fantasy as true. "How does that sound to you?"

"Lonely." She uttered, before even thinking of keeping the thought to herself.

Pennywise felt something inside of him tighten, gripped just by this one word.

Lonely. She could've said cursed or deplorable, or villainous, but she called me... Lonely.

"For hundreds of years I've been feeling only hatred towards mankind. Until you came, Madeline, and I won't let you... I can't let you go." The words spilled out of him, quick and unclear. "I can be anything. What you fear, what fascinates you, what you love." He

changed several times throughout the sentence; from a grotesque, inhuman creature, back to himself and then to Robert, sitting beside her cross-legged, with envy in his eyes. "I could turn into anything, I could..." His human hand reached mindlessly to brush her cheek, but ceased halfway and clenched tight backing away, not to get too close again.

"No." The girl was so small and defenseless now, but still definite. "Inside, you're always the same. I told you once; I'd rather see you as you are. The lie would only make it worse."

So, sitting back, It put on its favorite form's skin without an objection. It was almost annoying that her every word only deepened his feeling for her — a feeling he still could not name properly. The situation, along with Pennywise's cautious behavior and honesty gave her just enough courage to carry on without recoiling back in fear. Silence was slightly less unpleasant now. In the corner of her eye, Madeline still saw the small carousel.

"You said 'hundreds of years', does that mean all these things-" She gazed up, imagining the pile of objects building up above their heads. "-are..."

"Just as old as they seem, yes. It's become a habit of mine to collect them. People come and go, they leave things behind."

But why would someone, who despises human kind keep their remains? What'd he keep after her, she wondered.

"And the clown suit? Why do you choose it?" Madeline asked, now just out of sheer curiosity, and it made Pennywise smile.

"Oh, this. Hmm." His gloved hand reached for a different toy — a small box she didn't see earlier. "I came up with the idea around the sixteenth century. The clown pressed a small switch on its border, and another one briefly jumped out of the box with a crooked laugh. The real Clown and the puppet, they looked pretty much the same. "I was even quite entertaining, I believe." He said, handing the contraption to Madeline.

"Pennywise the *Dancing Clown*?" The girl read out loud the small

transcription, remember that in fact he did refer to himself by this name. "So you can *dance*? She almost giggled, picturing the wicked creature cracking a goofy dance.

"Well, yes. But last time I tried, it didn't really work out as I intended." *Damn you, Beverly.*

"I wish I could've seen that." Madeline admitted with the faintest smile lifting the corners of her lips.

It's eyes sparkled suddenly, seeing there might be a chance to get out of this pit of disaster it had thrown them into.

"We can try if you want."

"What?" The girl was puzzled. *Does he mean..? But that's ridiculous! We can't. I can't.* "I don't know if you noticed, but I'm not in the best physical state right now. I can't even stand."

"That's not a problem." Pennywise stood up and bent down towards her, with a questioning look on his face and outstretched arms.

Wait, what are you doing! That's not right. I should refuse! Said a small voice in her head. But she did not refuse. Screw it. She's been living her whole life caring only about the shouldn'ts and shoulds, and what good has it brought her? If It was to keep her here, while she was completely unable to do anything on her own, she might as well loosen up a little. For now, she was convicted to him anyway, escaping could wait.

He lifted her up careful, extremely careful, but with ease as if she didn't weight a pound. He held her steadily, waiting for her legs to straighten.

"OK, now what? Are you going to be lifting me all the time?"

"Not exactly, but I'll get you a little help."

Suddenly, the machinery above them kicked in, and let down several supporting ropes, which coiled themselves gently around Madeline's wrists, waist and knees. Had she tried it, she could effortlessly hang on them. The Clown checked her up and down, making sure she was

possibly stable, then nodded, satisfied.

"Shall we?"

A/N: Hi everyone! This chapter is focused only on It and Maddie, because I thought they really needed a full on, honest conversation to figure out their problems. There should be a sparkle in every hopeless situation, don't you think? ;) We're *slowly* getting to the end of this story, so yeah. Stay tuned :3

13. Chapter 12

Chapter 12: Ties that Bind

"Are you sure about this, Bill?" Asked Eddie Kaspbrak, trying to hide the worry in his voice. Until the very last moment, he didn't actually believe this was actually happening. He'd tried to push the fact aside until his eyes came across the missing kids' posters. One showed a young man, just at the step of adulthood it seemed, called David Harris, and another one was of a girl with bright eyes — Madeline Glave. Eddie believed he saw her mother accompanied by a police officer, waiting outside the school building, during his walk around the somewhat unfamiliar streets of Derry. The sight had truly gripped his attention, for it all was happening the way it did when he was a kid. Mothers waiting for their deceased children just where they were last seen, fathers subsisted in a dreadful, helpless silence... It used to be Eddie's past as well, and though he didn't know these people, it was clear for him, that this was the girl's mother. If only he could spit the bitterness out of his heart like the one that stays in one's mouth after swallowing their medicine...

"Poor Eds! Don't worry, I'll hold your hand." And there was Richie, back again under the cover of the never ending babbling and the thick lenses of his glasses. Believe it or not, but he was also scared. Same goes to all the Losers, but what he'd experienced during his return was going to give him nightmares for years. However, he liked the fire of determination burning inside of him. It was good to at last have a particular purpose to his actions. But the most important thing was, he really did miss those bastards.

"I told you not to call me that!"

"Oh, look at you. You're red as a tomato! What is this, another asthma attack? Cute, little E-"

"Beep-beep, Richie." Ben cut him off. The one and only, oh so changed Ben Hanscom, but only on the outside. Shaped like a model, maybe even thinner than it was necessary for a man his age; the skin was tightly enveloping the muscles, hanging just slightly loose on his

stomach. He's gone a long way to achieve this, but what exposed the teenage boy still remaining in him, was the man's gaze focused at the group's only girl (or should I say *woman?*), even as he spoke to Richie.

"It's OK, Eddie." Said she, placing a comforting hand on the shaken up Eddie, who's been gripping the respirator close to his chest. "You know we have to do this."

"I know, I know." He straightened up a little.

"Bill, just tell us when you're ready." Beverly was probably the most collected one of them at the moment. Despite all, she felt alive and strong. Considering what she's gotten herself into throughout the years, every day was full of distrust and the sweet torture of being her husband's punching bag, so what this situation truly meant to her was redemption. Hasn't she already battled the fear of being stuck in dependency?

The Losers were encircling the black pit of the well inside the dreadful house on Neibolt street. The cobwebs were still covering every inch of this place, dried out plants with their crooked vines going up to the ceiling, coiling around the pillars and chandeliers, choking life out of them. Dead leaves covered the washy carpets like peeled skin, while the weak construction creaked continuously. The house hasn't changed at all during almost three decades, and was just as dauntingly sinister. But the secrets it held were even more devilish, such as the well itself — a way straight to hell. (Can someone's hell be someone else's shelter?)

Bev had a baseball bat, Bill and Eddie had flashlights, while Richie had his talk, and Ben carried the heavy cartridges attached to a giant belt around his torso.

History was repeating itself, but not completely, for there was only six of them. No one said it out loud, but they all feared that six might just not be enough no matter how hard they'd try. Well, there was only one way to find out, and they were going to test their luck once again. They had to, though their return was just the opposite of encouraging. Yes, each of the Losers had seen Pennywise during their first day, and the creature was just as real and haunting as when they

were kids. Ben went to the library, Eddie to the pharmacy, Beverly to her long-lost home, Richie to the park, where the crime scene loomed abandoned, but not yet forgotten, and Bill ended up near the Barrens. It was in all these places, sneering with eyes aflame, screaming "You're too old! You're all 'too old' to stand against me!" That was a warning brought up not to scare them off, because Pennywise knew just who he was dealing with, but to plant a seed of doubt in their hearts. But the friends weren't going to give up. Not when so much was at stake.

The six scars on each palm started to pulsate, urging them to proceed with what was to be done. To clear this town fundamentally out of its rot. To clear their own minds of the daunting creature, always lurking in the shadows of their past. Adulthood has changed them, and yet not quite. If any of them was asked of their age, it would take a lot of focus not to say 'thirteen' or 'twelve' without stopping to think twice. Going back to Derry meant going back to who they were. Eddie using the aspirator while knowing he was never really sick, Richie wearing glasses though he'd changed them to contact lenses long ago, Ben looking at Beverly, Beverly looking at Bill, Bill stuttering — it all made sense, and they knew it.

"A-alright. Mike, could you?" Bill outstretched his hand, asking for the strongly interlaced rope Mike'd brought along with the two large pistols resting in the holsters on the man's sides. He handed the rope to Bill, though he could use it himself. Bill was the leader, no question about it.

And as any true leader would, he had a serious look on his face while tying it to the rail above the well.

"Let's g-g-go."

"Hey! Everyone cares only about Big Bill. What if 'I'm' not ready? Hm? What then? Am I not important to you guys?"

"Shut up, Richie."

"Yeah, shut up Richie."

Bill got to the stony edge, and they all watched as the first Loser

began to make his way down, while Richie Trashmouth Tozier went on with the mumbling.

"OK, OK I'll shut up, but who's gonna favor y'all with all those brilliant dick jokes? I'm telling you, you're gonna beg me to speak up."

("I really doubt that." Would've said Stan, had he been there with them.)

Bev cracked a laugh and somehow, each of them felt slightly better. Even Eddie giggled. Sometimes Richie's rudeness could be of some use, when it was about brightening up the mood. Only Mike, whose been keeping himself at distance since their late night talk at the library, where the decision to encounter It once again was made, he said nothing, and still had only worry exposed in his features.

There was a long way down ahead of them.

Pennywise's gloved hand hung in the air, waiting for the girl to accept it, but she was not sure. Madeline's seen examples of ballroom dancing in all those movies where all the beautiful ladies drifted gracefully across the dance floor along with their partners, and always thought it a dream come true, an exquisite, uncommon thing to do. But now, she felt nothing like a beautiful, light-footed lady.

He was patient, he did not urge her, and only because of that she finally placed her palm on his.

"I've never actually danced." She admitted shyly.

"That's fine. It's even best this way." A full smile expanded on his lush lips. Something about that girl's uncertainty and lack of experience in certain situations was just irresistibly captivating for him. "You'll have a proper tutor. Now..." The clown made a step forward and put his hand on her side. At the same time his gestures were both official and intimate, and it seemed quite weird to Madeline. This side of him was completely new to her, but she didn't know It felt unfamiliar with it as well.

"Place your hand on my shoulder." She did; just in between his collar and the giant puffed sleeve, but that would be impossible without the girl standing on the tips of her toes. "Good. Now try and follow my steps. Let me lead. It's easy."

It looked easy, but wasn't easy at all. They didn't break straight away into a flawless dance, they actually looked a bit stiff. With Madeline gazing down intensively, the Clown had to hold in a giggle each time she stepped on his feet. Seeing his amusement, she'd scowl at him and keep on stubbornly repeating his movement.

"But don't look down, Madeline. There is no dance without eye contact." And that was what concerned her the most. Looking into his eyes never ceased to intimidate her, but as they remained blue it was a little easier to hold the gaze. Instead of the red pom-poms of his shoes, she now focused on the slight hints Pennywise's upper body gave her as to direct her steps, and it went, in fact, notably better than before. He moved forward; she leaned backward, he turned to the side; she followed, a repetitive *one, two, three, one, two, three...* like a song in her head. And yet, the girl was still too distracted by his hold, and stare, those ropes around her and the feeling of unsteadiness in general. He sensed it all, of course.

"Relax. They won't let go, I promise. I won't." And that's when it clicked. Madeline finally stopped thinking, and let herself be led, almost floating in the air like a doll, a marionette. He spun her around smoothly, and step by step drove them into a quicker pace in a very peculiar form of waltz, slightly reinvented by him. He believed a similar one was danced by Derry's townsfolk at a festival about two centuries ago. And if it was to be honest, doing a simple, regular dance after all these years felt amazing, relieving even. In one particular moment, the creature felt the claws oozing back out impulsively, reacting to the contact between them, but he made them stop, before she noticed. He made them stop. *He* made them stop. Furthermore, he's done it automatically, without any great effort. It could be compared to an action as holding a breath or so, but what an exquisite feeling it was. Pennywise — the prisoner of his own insidious nature — has finally used it to his own benefit. Tamed it. It had never happened before. Not like this. Was that because of her? Was there a possibility that somehow the girl could cure him? No, no

that would be foolish of him to believe, but definitely something unusual was happening, and it caused a weird mix of conflicting emotions to run through It's mind. Unlike Madeline, It knew their relationship was in danger and just longed for a moment free of worrying and thinking about how to make it last. If this moment wasn't right, there wouldn't be a better one. Pennywise smiled a full, toothy grin, and swirled the girl around, then held her tighter. She was having a good time as well. Feeling like a feather carried by the wind, the whole world, consisting only of wooden walls, drapery and candlelight, spun around her continuously, and she wasn't dizzy at all. For a moment she was flying, she was safe. No. Not safe, but free... Funny, she should feel that way anywhere but in his arms. For the first time they were synchronized, equal. Their bodies moving to the same rhythm, their breathing calm and collected, hearts pounding in the same pace; hers young and true, his; dark as the depths of underground.

And then it all disappeared. The Clown froze as caught by a death grip, with an empty stare. He was already somewhere else, seeing this which did not please him at all. Madeline gave him a questioning, hopeless look, not understanding one bit what was happening.

"They're in." That was all the creature'd said before looking longingly into her eyes once more, and vanishing, just like that.

The girl hung there for a couple seconds, motionless, completely bewildered. A breath was caught in her throat, and when she let it out, suddenly all the air seemed to leave her body, making Madeline tumble to the ground. The feather has fallen.

What the hell has just happened? Who's in? And what does that mean?

While the girl was left alone, still partially upheld by those loose strings, with grievance taking over her mind, and nothing else to contemplate, one thought suddenly beamed brighter than the other ones.

Mike.

If anything goes wrong I will call for help, he'd said. Maybe that's what he

did. But... But how, and what help was that exactly? Was she really in need of any help? Damn it, of course she was! Maybe Mike's brought backup, maybe... Oh no.

If this was true, if that really were the Losers, there were not so many possibilities as to how it all would end. It was either them, or It. But what could Madeline do about it? What role was she to play in the final encounter? Because she couldn't just do nothing, could she? Could it even be defeated? And if it is defeated, then...

A pained expression took over her features, while selfish thoughts spread in her brain. Selfish thoughts that should not be, but oh they *were*.

"I don't even understand, this place should be too much even for that nasty fucking creep." Richie's voice echoed in the darkened tunnel, along with the paddling of six silhouettes moving forward. He was clenching his nostrils, breathing only through his mouth, highly irritated.

"You don't say." Grumbled his fellow friend Eds, nonetheless repulsed with all the so said 'grey water'.

"Should've taught the jerk what an air freshener is, before shoving it up his ass."

"Shh! W-we ha-ave to stay f-focused." Bill stated cautiously, directing the light from left to right, and then left again, scanning the area restlessly. He really wasn't in the mood for jokes right now. They were close to each other, slowly making their way into the darkness; Mike covering their backs, Bill at the front, guiding the way. The further they got in, the deeper Bill's mental scars were being cut into by the invisible blade of memories, making the man's soul bleed with the guilt he still felt somewhere deep, deep down inside. *Georgie...* Whispered a teenage boy's voice trapped inside his head. But the grown up wouldn't let it take over. He's learned to live with it, to function normally, but the feeling was still there. Quiet and distanced, not aching to be expressed no more, but would probably stay with him until his very last day.

"No worries, Big Bill. We're gonna kick It right in the pom-poms." There was just no such word as 'enough' in Richie's dictionary.

"It would be best to figure out the way first. And not split up. Under any circumstances." Mike stated, gazing at each face, trying his best to make the message clear. He remembered just how it went when they got distracted before, and didn't notice that Stan was missing. To take them down one by one was a piece of cake for It, but together they did have a chance.

"I think the first ramification is just ahead of us. We should go up the tide. That's where the center is." Suggested Ben. He didn't know exactly how did he come up with the idea, but it was probably because of his profession. Being an architect had its advantages. But the thing was, there was no tide. And even if there was, it was barely noticeable.

And so on they went, damped in the filthy water up to the knees. Ben was right. After not more than a couple minutes the tunnel opened to three passageways; one more spooky than the other. Bill ordered them to stop, and the friends turned to decide which one to choose, all except for Beverly.

The red-head went on just a few steps further into the central one, and then stopped to a halt momentarily. Her hands squeezed around the baseball bat.

"Guys..." She called still gazing at what occurred before her. "I think you might want to see this."

Lush, shiny balloons filled the tunnel, floating on air, moving smoothly like wraiths. Together they spelled a huge 'WELCOME BACK', written in large, white letters, one for each crimson orb. There were more, as the passage went on, with arrows pointing ahead like road signs. The message was clear. Let the game begin.

14. Chapter 13

Chapter 13: Beginning of the End

"Should we go?" Ben's question sounded as if it belonged to a convict; not questioning if it is possible to survive, but in what way will the execution be fulfilled.

Meantime, Eddie started choking on air desperately, struggling to suppress the nonexistent sickness inside, to be strong. Be an adult. He knew the asthma wasn't real, that he was healthy as never before, but after less than thirty seconds he just had to do it. The familiar sound of the respirator healed the body, but at the same time damaged the last bits of the man's sanity, filling the atmosphere with uneasiness. Bill nodded, gazing at the levitating white letters. *He thrusts his fists...* What an encouraging greeting. Even Richie went silent and couldn't stop reading those two words over and over again.

"It knows w-where we are a-anyway. Besides, we're h-here to f-f-face it, not to h-hide." Not good. It was harder to keep the words flowing fluently. Harder to stand straight.

Come on Bill, do it for Georgie, do it for Stan, for the Losers, for freedom... Just... Go. And he did. He had to be tough for his friends and all its victims, forgotten, lost with the tide. Bev went just after him, Ben after her, with Mike on his side, then Richie, who hesitated for a moment.

"You OK there, Eddie?"

"Yeah, yeah I'm... fine." The man was still gasping nervously.

"Oh, but you're never fine, that was a rather *rhetorical* question." Richie adjusted his glasses, lifting his chin up proudly like a professor, distinguishing the word 'rhetorical' with a funny accent. His friend wasn't very amused. "Don't give me that look Eds, that's just why I like you. C'mon."

The corridor seemed to have no end at all, though the Losers have

been going just as the signs told them, and after what could be either minutes or hours, it was really hard to tell, they were still getting nowhere, and that was even worse than fear. Powerlessness. The shadows around started to blend before their eyes and were all the same, as if they were going in circles. None of them knew what to expect and that was tragic. Suddenly, every splash was of a monster prowling around, every creak was a muffled scream, every swish a demon's whisper. And they fought that small test of patience bravely. Only Richie was very displeased. He scoffed and suddenly left Eddie's side, going to the front.

"Come out, you crackhead! Show yourself!" Darkness carried his dare. And the darkness answered.

At first, now alone at the back of the group, Eddie thought he'd just heard another screech of the pipes above, but the sound sent shivers down his spine anyway. Soon enough he realized it was in fact not just a screech, but a high-pitched laugh. A crooked laugh. All of a sudden, the two flashlights flickered before their light abruptly died. Shadows filled their eyes and the Losers tried to stay still and calm, but then a scream ripped through the misty air and a panicked disarray spread amongst them. They tried to recognize one another in the dark, but it was almost impossible.

"Bill! Bill, is that you?" Asked someone.

"I got you, Bev. I got you." Someone else replied.

"Who turned the fucking lights off!?" No need to explain to who *these* words belonged.

"E-everyone, hold still!"

And they did. Well, those who were left. They didn't notice the change at first, but simply stood pressed tight together, like a living shield. During those tedious seconds the darkness slowly retreated, and the abandoned flashlight shone on their silhouettes. Three. There were only three of them. Ben wasn't actually holding onto Beverly, but to Richie's shaking arm, with their leader in front of the two. It was a horrible shock to see half of the group missing. The monster made the first move, and it was not in terms of fair play. The Losers'

strong facade needed to be broken.

"Woah, what the hell?!" seethed Richie, shaking out of his friends' grip. Ben spun around, eyes opened wide, mouth agape.

"Oh no. Where are the others?! Bev! Mike!"

"Fuck! It's taken them, It... It... That's so fucking bad! Bill, what do we do?" While they were panicking, Bill has not moved an inch.

"W-we have to f-find them. We need to g-go. Right now."

"Guys..?" Called Eddie when the shadowy blinders fell from his eyes. He's found himself in another place, deeper in the sewer system, but wasn't aware of that at first. All the tunnels looked exactly the same, and just mere seconds ago he had all the Losers in front of him. The man's brows furrowed. The sudden realization came upon him running through his every nerve, like a flood of ice-cold shower. He was alone.

"Ooh no. No, no, no, no. Bill! Richie! Bev! Where are you?"

And just when Eddie thought there was no hope, no escape, he heard something. A voice resounding through the darkened passageway. A familiar voice.

"Eddie! Eddie, is that you?"

"Richie..." He whispered, heart filled with relief, and lunged straight towards his friend, without thinking twice. While not being held back by his mother's overprotective grip, he'd always been a fast runner. In moments like this, the imaginary sickness just ceased to exist.

"I'm here! Help me!" Richie's voice led him through the misty sewer maze.

"Help me, Eddie!"

He wanted to. He wanted to with all his heart, and when he'd arrived just where he was supposed to be, it pounded like crazy.

"Richie?" The tunnel before him opened to a bigger area, where many pipes and conduits met, with all types of valves and rusty machinery. At the center, there was a huge metal cap, uncovering a round stony pit and the voice came just from there. Eddie could hear the scrimmage and water splashing vigorously.

"I'm down here! In this fu-" The rest of the sentence was replaced by a spatter, and then desperate choking. The man ran towards the pit, breathing heavily. He should've saved some strength for later, but as careless as it was, he did not care at the moment, and got to his knees in a haste, the harsh ground grazing his legs.

"Richie, what the hell happened?!" Asked he, with both hands clutched to the opening's edges. It seemed to be yet another well, but reaching even deeper than the one they'd get through. This particular one was more of a cesspit, and Richie was practically drowning in it. But why? Moments ago they were together.

"Seriously? How about you ask questions when I'm out of this shit hole?" He spat, struggling to keep his head over the surface.

"Nevermind, I got you." He leaned down with an outstretched arm. Richie grabbed it, hard, and reached for the other one, making poor Eddie whine from the exertion. That man weighted more than anything he's lifted in his entire life. The grip around his wrists was so sticky and slimy, that it should make him just slip down, but didn't. Richie kicked his legs briskly, while his friend slowly lifted him up, with his limbs so tense, that he felt every single muscle of his arms and hands tighten.

"Ah, thank fuck, I thought you'd never come." He heard a slight amount of amusement in the voice coming from below. And had he looked behind those thick glasses, he'd see the same emotion hidden in them.

"Shut up and pull, Richie." Huffed the fraught Eddie. "Or you might never get out."

"Yeah, well, you know..." The response was untroubled, playful even. "Now when I think about it..." He hung motionless, like a loose sack of stones, making Eddie's chest hit against the cold base.

"Aw! What the-" He'd bitten his lip while falling. The metallic taste of blood spread on his tongue.

"Instead of getting me out, you could join me in." Eddie gulped down at him and knew just then, that the man whose weight pulled him further was not Richie. "Hm? How'd you like that, Eds?"

How irresponsible, how *dumb* of him to fall for this. The man let out a muffled groan, feeling as if his arms were about to be jolted out.

"Join me Eddie. It's time. Don't you wanna float?"

He gazed in horror at the creature beneath him, seeing It's already begun to change. The whites of its eyes went yellow, then distended as if the eyeballs wanted to pop out. It's skin was grey, and abscesses spread on it in a blink of an eye like a horrible decease. The veins of Its arms were vibrant and purple, and the crooked smile toothless.

Eddie screamed.

"Oh, come on! I won't bite... hard. Oh no, wait — I will. You'll be rotting down here as you were ought to be since the very beginning!"

Eddie howled as loud as lungs would allow him to. Was this really the end? 'No, it can't! It can't be!' Had the blood not been pounding so deafeningly in his ears, the man would've heard a rustle from behind. His body slowly started to give in, inching lower in, though his mind was focused entirely on not doing so.

"Take that, you filthy motherfucker!" A loud swish filled his ears, and a long metal poker was swung toward the monster's distorted face. Richie's imitation's head fell back. It was the real Richie! A couple minutes after they'd started searching for the missing ones, they heard Eddies scream, and miraculously Richie was the first to arrive. Now, the two look-alike's gazed at each other intensively, hate beaming from the both of them. The real one knelt down, next to his friend, swinging the temporarily weapon at the monster.

It winced, and struggled, but though the wounded skin started peeling back from It's current integument, It didn't let go. Eddie cried, dragged down again, feeling his lower arms go numb. Richie

clenched his jaws, and threw the poker with all the strength he had, hitting It right in the forehead, leaving an oval red mark. But It did not let go.

Not knowing what to do, the man searched hopelessly for something else to grab and toss at the oppressive creature, but was there really a point in repeating the action? Seconds flew by. Eddie's face creased with pain went from red to purplish. Then, not really knowing why has the idea developed in his mind, Richie reached for the respirator which laid on the ground, forgotten by its owner. He took it quickly and leaned as low into the pit as he could, outstretching his hand towards Its drooling maw.

"You gotta shut up at once." He'd said before spraying the wailing creature with Eddie's placebo medicine, and to his very surprise It recoiled back with a groan of pain, and sunk into the filthy well with a muffled splash.

Just in time, Bill and Ben rushed in, breathless.

"My God, Eddie! What was that!? What happened?" Asked Ben while Eddie's savior dragged his lump friend back up, where he laid flatly, completely drained out of energy.

"Better don't ask, Haystack." Richie positioned himself beside Eddie.

"Holy fuck, Eds. You're one lucky bastard, that I found you on time."

"Yeah... thanks." The response was weak. His world was still spinning and vision still not fully regained, along with the shallow breath.

"Not to interrupt you guys, but we do really have to keep moving. Mike and Bev are still out there."

Two, shadowy figures roved around the misty passageways, holding firmly onto each other; a red-head with a baseball bat, and an armed man, both trembling, but trying not to show it. They knew they'd been separated from the rest, but had no idea why, and what was to come. The fear of the unknown is the worst kind of fear. A pained, high-pitched sound echoed in the darkness, reaching their ears as

well.

"Is that..?" Goosebumps spread on Beverly's pale skin. Even while unhealthily pale, and dirty, she still had that charm. That flicker for which all the boys had fallen for, all these years ago.

"No. No, it isn't." Mike's tone was low and emotionless. He was fierce, determined not to give into It's games. It might have been what Beverly thought it was, but there was no place for risk in their current situation. "C'mon. We'll find them. We have to get back together, before It comes. And It will come, sooner or later."

The only thing Mike feared was that while they walked alone, It was slaughtering one of the others somewhere there, in between nightmare and reality. But he had to push these thoughts aside; that was the only way to keep on with their mission. The sound did not come back, and they continued their way down the tunnel, blindly choosing which turn to pick until the first glimpses of light touched their worried faces.

"Oh my God, Mike I think we made it. I remember this area. This is the center!" Said Beverly, rushing forward a bit faster. *Maybe they're here. Maybe It's taken them just like It's taken me when we split up for the first time. I'm coming for you Bill, we won't let It win.* A flame of hope lit up in her heart, making her legs move faster, leaving Mike behind.

"Hey, wait!"

She stepped through the large opening and saw Pennywise's lair in all its horrendous glory; dimmed light gleaming from above, bodies floating, junk scattered everywhere. It seemed as if the enormous pile of It's trophies created a one huge living organism along with the wagon, and it's every breath was followed with a cacophony of creaks and scrapes. Otherworldly vibrations could be felt in the atmosphere. Although there was no one familiar to be seen among the levitating corpses, not anywhere here. The place was abandoned. Or so she thought, waiting a few feet past the entrance for Mike to join her.

"There's no one here." She said not knowing if the fact should bring relief or ever deeper concern.

"Oh no, I'm sure there is someone. There's gotta be."

"What? What are you talking about?" She saw the glimmer in his tired eyes. Mike was searching for something. No, someone. Someone she had yet to know about. Mike still hasn't told them about Madeline. He'd tried to pick the right moment to reveal the girls' history and his own part in it, but just couldn't ring himself to do so. Each time, the words would get stuck in his throat, and turn into an unwanted silence. But now his gaze went up, focused at the massacred bodies, searching for a particular one, with nerves strained so tightly, it made him feel like he was going to faint. It'd be hard to describe Mike's relief when he didn't find her there.

"Mike! What is it?"

"She's alive..." He whispered hopefully. Maybe he didn't screw things up completely. Maybe she could be saved.

"Jesus, what's gotten into you? Who? Who's alive? Tell me!"

But here was no time for stories now. If Madeline wasn't floating like the others, or like Beverly before her, then where was she? Mike's stare slid down until it rested upon the wagon. Of course. He rushed towards it.

"I'll need your help with getting inside that thing, Bev."

"I'm not helping you with anything unless you tell me what's going on. Who's there?" The man's behavior began to irritate her. He huffed impatiently, and finally focused at her. She could've seemed so hopeless at the moment, but Mike knew what was hiding beneath those red hair waves and innocent face. All the Losers knew she was probably the strongest of them. She's proven it many times.

"Listen. Before I called for you... there was someone else. A girl, whose also seen It. She came to me, looking for help, and I failed her, OK? I failed. I believe she still might be alive inside of that damned wagon, so we better hurry."

"You did *what*? Why didn't you tell us?" Bev demanded answers, but already headed towards It's lair alongside Mike.

"Please, let's not talk about this right now."

A loud thud made Madeline jump, caught off guard. When she was alone, the girl managed to get back onto the mattress and position herself possibly comfortable. But now her peace was interrupted. The frantic pounding on the wooden door made her clench her hands into fists, gripping the material of her dress nervously. Someone desperately tried to get in. But who was it? She picked herself up on her elbows, still controlled by the ropes. Her heartbeat was fast, filled both with hope and worry.

Then, the thumps abruptly stopped, and for a moment all was silent again. But whoever it was, was definitely not going to give up. Soon enough, Madeline heard two loud scrapes at each side of the wooden ceiling, then a crack, and to her astonishment, the wagon's frontal wall leaned forwards, and then fell down. The bang was so loud, it made her recoil back in shock. And even greater was her surprise, when she found out who waited for her at the other side. She gulped at the two silhouettes; one familiar, the other not at all.

15. Chapter 14

Chapter 14: Redemption

Mike let out a sigh of relief, and almost had to steady himself not to abate from the flood of emotions. Madeline did not beam with joy and gratitude at their arrival, but froze in doubt instead, and watched Mike with concern.

Oh, Mike... You shouldn't have come here, it may not end well.

"My God... Are you OK?" Breathed out the woman's subtle voice. The girl examined her as she got closer, kneeling down to her in a haste. With hair like winter fire and foxy appearance, she was beautiful. Could it be that she was a Loser as well? It would appear so, since the temporary weapon she carried gave her a more dangerous look. Madeline saw the confusion in her eyes while they rested upon her dress and those weird contraptions coiled around her.

"I'm... fine." As fine as one can be with a giant, healing wound on their chest, injured both physically and mentally. Not that she was complaining.

"Dear, what has It done to you, closed in here all by yourself, you must be so brave." Those strong, yet delicate eyes gazed at Madeline with an understanding she unfortunately couldn't have known the source of. "Mike, bring me something sharp, would you? We need to cut these things off."

The man simply nodded and went on to search for anything useful in the pile of junk. It all was happening so naturally, but for Madeline it was almost unbelievable. She's got so accustomed to the not so bright idea of her future, that to think someone's come to rescue her and fight It was ridiculous.

"What's your name, dear?" Did she really have to call her 'dear'? It reminded her of Lynn; another person the girl felt guilty to have abandoned without a word.

"Madeline."

"We'll get you out of here, Madeline." The woman smiled comfortingly at her, but she's seen her mouth twitch. No one could be certain of that. "I'm Beverly. We're here to put this horror to an end."

"So it's true? You are the Losers?"

"Well, yes. We are." Now the smile became genuine and warm. No pretend.

"And you're *all* here?" Madeline wouldn't be herself without the usual ton of questions. Was it good news if they really were? She didn't know. Beverly was hesitant for a second, as if she suddenly remembered something.

"No, not all. Stan didn't make it." She whispered more to herself than to the girl, lost in thought. They both went silent, and while Madeline wondered who Stan was, the panels creaked under Mike's heavy steps. He handed a piece of a broken mirror to Bev, who began to cut the strings straight away.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Madeline." The man said miserably, gazing upon her with a look that confirmed he wasn't lying. "It's all my fault. I shouldn't have let you... I..."

"No, you shouldn't." Said Madeline quietly. "But it's OK. I'm OK."

No, she wasn't. And it all definitely wasn't OK. And although nothing pleased him more right now than to know she was alive, what he really wanted to ask was how in the heavens name did she do it? She was trapped here, sure, but unharmed (Mike couldn't have seen her bound up injuries), and in a dress?

Just as the thought has crossed his mind, a loud growl resounded through the whole place, making the atmosphere suddenly go cold.

"You." It said low and darkly, in a rage of a million monsters. This one word pierced Mike's ears and mind. He turned immediately towards one of the entrances to finally see It. All three of them did, not daring even to breathe. Pennywise was there, tall and demonic, red eyes aflame, almost shaking with anger. "Get away from her!" It

had acknowledged Bev was there, but for now the eyes designed to hypnotize burned holes in Mike's skull, penetrating his very soul. The man's jaw dropped.

"How *dare* you come here, you pathetic, foolish man." The Clown began to encircle them slowly, and his gloved hands were twitching, just as if the monster couldn't contain himself. However, he was not looking at the girl. He couldn't. It would've made him weaker. Madeline's entire body was taken over by unpleasant shivering, same as Beverly, who froze with hands up on one of the ropes.

"I warned you, but you just don't listen, do you?" There was not the slightest hint of humanity in that voice. A long vicious smile extended on It's lips and went up further than it should, almost like a Cheshire Cat's, but filled with sharp, outgrown teeth. Pennywise glowered at Mike like an animal, and then the world suddenly speeded up. The monster lunged to crush him so fast, Madeline barely saw the movement. The only thing she knew was that Mike's reaction was immediate. A loud bang resounded in her ears and the man was no longer in her sight. He'd prepared himself for this, unlike during the first fight. There was a giant bullet in each pistol. One shot made, one to go. At the sound of It's furious groan, Beverly flinched, waking up from the shock, and rapidly went back to cutting the ropes. One, two, three strings snapped. Her hands were shaking. And when she was nearly finished, the second shot swished through the air. Was it a miss? No. But that didn't matter.

Pennywise's right arm swung back, taking the bullet, but his feet stood firmly on the ground. He was slowed down only for a moment, and the higher rose his anger when the ruby drops of its blood floated lazily up. For just a split-second, Mike noticed It was already wounded. An oval mark on its forehead was well covered by the white paint, and the material on those layered sleeves was partially torn. But the observation was made brief, for the monster was already charging at him, closing its fists around his throat. Mike was knocked down and trapped, but still fought with all his spirit, hoping that would be enough.

Beverly freed Madeline of the last string's hold and quickly grabbed her bat to run and help her friend, but before she did, the woman noticed the bandage on the girl's chest. It was just a moment, there

was not a second to waste, and yet it captured Beverly's attention. Madeline felt a sudden urge to spill everything that's happened to her. Se had a feeling, Beverly would understand, she saw it in her eyes. They might've had much more in common than the girl could imagine, but before she could think about it, the red-head was already off to stand for Mike.

Pennywise's fingers dug violently into the man's skin, and he watched in horror as the flames rose higher in It's eyes, feeling the drops of saliva fall onto his cheeks. The monster let out a victorious laugh, but to Mike it seemed more like a desperate cough. Cough of a person choking up with smoke. The fire... It was still burning inside of his enemy, still alive within. The clenching grip suddenly beamed with warmth, which increased as quickly as a pool of gasoline lit by a match.

Mike screamed, feeling the flames lick his flesh both from outside and in. It was about to burn him alive. He thought the heat would consume him whole; chew on the powerless human body, then swallow it and make it into dust, but suddenly he saw a flash of red, then an abrupt whoosh, and the death's hold was drawn away. A single swing of Bev's bat sent it scraping to the ground.

Madeline whined as the blunt pain returned, when she was freed again. The girl managed to crawl to the stage's edge, and observed the fight in pure terror. Three figures; two clumsy, but intent, the woman protecting the man, and one completely out of this world, getting to it's feet to tower over them again.

Then, another four emerged from one of the round openings. The first man she saw was tall and thin, with a flashlight in his hand, and an adamant look on his face. The next one was of usual height, scanning the surroundings, who seemed very aware and cautious. At the end came two, slightly bent silhouettes; one with ruffled hair and huge glasses, supporting the other, looking the most frail, and just slightly feminine for a man. *Stan didn't make it* Beverly'd said. So that was right. There were six of them. All the remaining Losers were still alive.

The newcomers figured out what's going on straight away.

"Hey!" Called their leader, summoning It's attention. But his brave eye darted away for a second, noticing the opened stage at the center, and a girl in a dress, who also observed him. It confused him, not less than the other three, but there was no time for explaining it now.

It has stiffened and shook it's head as if the sound of the man's voice was extremely unpleasant, then turned to face him slowly. The jingles which followed Pennywise's every movement reminded Madeline of a snake.

"Look who have we here. Billy Boy! So willing to reach me... You just can't get enough of your old friend Pennywise. I'm touched." Mockery poured from It's mouth like a foul liquid.

Bill didn't respond to the taunt, just slowly approached the monster, and all the Losers joined him, forming a circle around It, whose smile never left the grotesque face. A chill ran through Bill's spine. The air was vibrant and cold. A calm before the storm.

Madeline watched them, feeling useless and powerless. What right did she have to remain there and do nothing? She wanted to help. To do something. Anything. To stand against It, or... with It. But which part of It? The one she danced with, the one she finally felt happy with, or the villainous one, that ate children, and wore countless masks? She'd have to face both, while *they* fought only against one.

The circle around Pennywise was slowly closing, and his head spun observantly in each direction, claws ready to cut, teeth bared. Bill dropped the flashlight aside, and bent to pick up a metal chain laying at his feet.

"So that's how it's gonna be..." It said spitefully, eyes glowering.

"That's exactly how it's going to be." Bill replied, for the first time since he'd arrived in Derry; without a stutter. Echo carried his battle shout like a navy blue sky carries a flash of lightening, and then the thunder begun. Madeline's memories of that moment were hazy and unclear. The only thing she remembered was that she felt like at a war. After a while, her eyes ceased to notice the brave members of the Lucky Seven, whom she wouldn't have recognized in the havoc of it all anyway, but saw only their opponent, roaring and smashing

with his large hands everything that the tips of his claws could reach. She watched him change into many horrific beasts such as a werewolf, when he attempted to rip Richie in half, or a mummy, whose yellowish swathes had tightened around Ben's face, before Bill's chain tore them up. There was a leper with his whole body looking like one giant wound, nearly biting into Eddie's arm, and blood which he spat on Beverly's face after she'd saved him. Ben of course fought like hell to protect her. But It has been also taking hits. Rough ones. Sturdy ones. It growled from anger, but from pain as well, and she knew she was ought to root for the victory of the Losers with all her heart, for the monstrosity of It was revealing itself just before her eyes, but she only felt degraded, and a bit like crying.

Mike and Ben drew away from the boiling fight at once, just a few feet away while It was taking care of Richie, who'd enraged it with his reckless words again, and they managed to reload the guns. Mike handed one to Ben, and then the both of them quickly got to their positions, aiming at the entity from different angles.

Madeline gasped, at the very edge of her heart breaking into pieces, and holding onto the wooden wall, she got clumsily to her knees, then stood up, legs shaking weakly. Some kind of unexplainable strength has awakened in her, assuaging the pain.

What are you fighting for, Madeline? Who is your ally, and who is your enemy?

The girl gazed at the two, then at It with jaws of enormous size inching towards Richie, and again at the silver barrels.

"Please, don't..."

Don't *what*? Don't let It kill Richie? Don't let the demon live? Don't let this nightmare go on?

"...don't shoot him."

It was just a whisper, subtle and fragile among the shouts and sounds of struggling bodies, shoes scraping against the floor, but it hasn't gone unnoticed.

The monster froze, and it seemed like if the whole world was wiped out of sound. The Clown's head turned towards her, looking at her, really looking at her, for the first time since he'd left without a word. Though the hand grasping Richie's shirt remained clenched, his features were somehow softened, mixed with a look of genuine surprise and something... more intimate. And in this moment Madeline knew that if there was such thing as an emotional bond of unity between a human and a monster, they had it. His eyes flashed blue and calm, and... And that's when the two shots were fired.

Two bangs, six abruptly held breaths, one body hitting the floor, Madeline's scream — it all blended into one excruciating sound. The Losers backed away as if pushed by some invisible force when Pennywise's back landed on the stony surface with one hole cracked at the side of his skull, the second in his chest. It's clown costume was stained, hair all messed up and dull of color. The face had this very same expression It gave the girl the barest of seconds ago, and looked like a porcelain doll's. It was beautiful, in a way.

Beverly raised her palm to cover the astonishment that's taken over her face. Was that it? Was that enough? The whole group was mauled nonetheless. They gazed at one another with doubt written all over their faces, searching for a confirmation that couldn't be provided.

"No." Came Madeline's broken whisper. "No, no, no." She repeated as her shaky legs carried her forwards, almost tripping on her own toes, to rest near him, white dress splayed on the cold ground. There was that sharp unpleasant gust in her thigh again, but she didn't care. The girl's trembling hands hung somewhere above the puffed sleeves, scared to even brush against the material, not knowing what to do to make things right, although they never truly were. She didn't notice the wetness on her cheeks until a couple of lonely teardrops fell onto Pennywise's collar.

"Who... are you?" Asked Bill, utterly confused, but that wasn't exactly what his question was about. He should've asked *Why are you crying over this monstrosity?*, but it didn't matter. She wouldn't have answered anyway.

Madeline didn't know how to feel about them right now. It wasn't their fault that her heart got so hopelessly captured by a demon. It

wasn't their fault that her dreams had roots in her nightmares. She did not understand it as well, she 'wanted' to hate It, but just couldn't.

"Her name's Madeline." Eddie blinked disbelieving his own words. "She's the girl from the poster." Richie's eyebrows furrowed.

"How the heck'd you know that?"

"I just do."

While the girl was bent miserably over the creature, something in Mike's mind unlocked. Something that made his eyes open wide and mouth open mindlessly. *To me It always comes as human.* she'd said. *Always... So how many times has It come to her exactly, before she ran into the library that day?* She spoke of the monster with just a slight hint of fondness then, and he hadn't even noticed. *But it just can't be, that's ridiculous, that's...*

And then it all changed. It's eyes shone up like floodlights, casting two streams of golden brightness all the way up. Convulsions took over the creature, and Madeline instinctively crawled back, shock spreading in her features. The Clown's limbs started violently bending at very unnatural angles, but not a single crack of bone was heard. When It finally settled in a position similar to a bridge, Ben and Mike's guns were already raised, and Bev's bat all prepared. But it would've brought them no good anyway. The whole figure of It molded and grew, the suit merged into the body, which bulged into an enormous size. Four new arms oozed through where It's ribs were supposed to be, and suddenly the demon was not shaped as human, but a gigantic spider, and not two, but six golden eyes scanned the surroundings viciously; one for each Loser.

Beverly's terrified shriek resounded in Madeline's ears. She gazed at the hideous shape, each leg twice her size, like hypnotized and completely out of words.

Waking up from the daze of this horrible surprise, Bill charged at It again, but was quickly pinned down by the Spider's huge limb. That was enough for the Losers to regain the fight spirit, and once more try to attack it. The first one to be thrown away like a ragged doll was Mike. Then Ben. Then Beverly, and although each time they got

up, fierce as never before, and bruised twice as much, their chances were weak. While they fought like little, stubborn ants against the Spider, not caring about the lack of damage they were making, the monster's large maw moved closer to Bill's face. The man thrust his fists and kicked against the ground, trying to resist it, with no effect. For a moment Madeline thought It was about to consume his face, but it stopped inches away from his nose, casting the beaming light 'into' him. The girl saw Bill's pupils and irises go blank, taking in the gleam, and she felt that urgent push again. She struggled to contain herself, control herself. There was very little strength left in her, but it had to be enough. Holding her breath, she crouched awkwardly, and focused wholly on straightening her legs without them collapsing under the weight.

With each second, Bill's moves were more languid until the man finally went lump, and It released him. His body moved, controlled entirely by It's eternal power, lifting up gently with eyes open wide. It looked as if the grown man's insides were filled with air, and he began to float up, losing touch with reality. If It could, It would've smiled a wide, satisfied grin, but the victory didn't last long. The connection was broken by the girl, stumbling to push Bill aside, and take his place. Just a second before losing it into a feeling of emptiness, she saw those three enchanting light sources somewhere in It's bottomless gullet, shining with an untamed energy.

It happened so suddenly and 'gently', that Madeline didn't even know when exactly has she stepped into this transcendental state. The pain was gone, she couldn't feel the soaring muscles no more, in fact, she couldn't 'feel' or see at all. She could only sense what was all around her, meaning by that nothingness so deep, it seemed dense like a liquid filling in her lungs, ears and eyes. The girl levitated somewhere there in the deep, but could as well be laying, or sitting, or standing... She's lost the certitude.

Is this where you get at the end? Am I dead? - she shouldn't help but wonder, and the thought spread around her like smoke. The answer she got wasn't physical in any way, and could not be heard, but simply appeared in her mind as if it was there from the very beginning, and yet did not belong to her.

No. Not yet.

Then... where am I?

Why did you do that?

I didn't want him to die.

No, why did you stand up for me?

The talk carried on, and she carried on, not at her own accord, but guided by something entirely else. Her senses were becoming more and more blurred, giving in to the pervasive presence she was led towards.

I didn't want you to die.

But that'd be impossible. You can't pick both sides. Someone has got to lose if the fight is to end.

I... I...

What are you fighting for, Madeline? Who is your ally, and who is your enemy?

They're all the same.

There was something ahead of her. Something enormous and ancient... and alive. A shape flushed through her imagination. It was... a turtle? Yes, it would appear so, and she really wanted to focus more, but it was suddenly very difficult to accomplish. She actually felt just the opposite. She was losing herself. Even her own thoughts now seemed oddly unfamiliar, and were replaced by another ones. They belonged to It.

She'll die, she'll die, she'll die... the words echoed repeatedly like a mourning melody. *She gave me the strength to carry on, to unleash the power, and now she'll leave me, the one I've been fighting for.* Pain; she felt it in the very core of her existence, different from any pain she's ever experienced. *My girl, my precious girl, my anchor...* *She'll die.* Silence. There was nothing but silence. Her conscience started to fade, and she felt herself drifting away. But suddenly she felt an itch.

The slightest itch of hope.

Unless...

"No!" Called Mike, catching Madeline's desperate action in the corner of his eye. He immediately dropped his gun, and hurried in her direction, but her frail body was already lifted up, eyes already lost in the Deadlights. The four remaining gazes eventually caught up to Mike, and followed him along, seeing the floating girl. Bill was still laying on the ground, trying to calm down his breathing. Beverly let go of her baseball bat as well, and came up to the librarian, making almost a full circle around the motionless spider.

"Why'd she do that?" Bev's delicate eyebrows furrowed with pity. There was a long, thin cut above the right one.

"I guess Madeline's one of us now. She saved Bill." The answer was mild and collected.

"W-what?" Came Bill's cough from below, and when his chaotic stare went up, he finally understood what happened. Someone, who didn't even know him made the most bold of sacrifices to keep him alive.

"So you know her, Mike?" Asked Ben, stepping between him and the red-head.

"I do, but that's a long story." It wasn't, really. He just didn't want to explain it.

"I don't understand..." Said Richie lost in thought, forgetting at once about being his dorky, vulgar self, when he noticed the slight trail of blood staining the skirt of her dress at the left side.

"Wait, so if she's with us, then... it would make us a Seven again." Stated Eddie, fascinated by his own discovery.

"Well, yes. As long as she lives." Mike answered, swallowing the bitterness on his tongue.

"Is there anything we can do" Ben wanted to know, moving his eyes to Madeline's absent stare and back to the monster's jaw repeatedly.

"No." The one to reply was Bill, who was currently to shake out of the shock. "She's going to die if we interrupt them. And we wouldn't manage to physically defeat It anyway. Not in this state. I've never seen It gain so much power at once." A series of confirming nods followed his statement. "Her fight is completely different from ours now. We can only wait and hope she wins it."

Just as the words left his mouth, the Spider's eyes abruptly opened, even wider than before, and light erupted from them like a fire geyser. The invisible hold let go of Madeline's body; it trembled and then collapsed, but luckily Mike'd caught her before she hit the ground. What was happening to It at that moment could only be compared to the death of a star. It was choking up on the light that emanated from inside of the entity to the point when the atmosphere around went at least five degrees higher. The power was leaving Its cursed body in a truly spectacular way. The tension only rose, and no one really knew what to do, other than simply back away. And when it seemed Its physicality would just not be able to contain all of it, the Spider abruptly shrank, and fell onto the floor. Just like that.

Madeline's eyes flickered as the girl gained back her consciousness, and took a breath so deep, it almost hurt her lungs. Apparently she was the only one, who knew what to do. She shook off of Mike's hold and crawled towards the very center of Its lair, where the seemingly lifeless body had fallen. The dirty water splashed on her face, and her whole body was aching, but that she cared the least about. The only real thing to her right now was the outline of a familiar shape in front of her. Yes, it was familiar. The closer she got, the more unclear her vision became, blurred by the tears filling in her eyes. She bent over the silhouette, wiping hastily her eyes.

It was *him*. It was Robert. Dirty, and pale, and miserable, but still Robert. Madeline's fingers went to brush the messy strands of his dark hair off his forehead. In her entire life she had never been so happy. The same could not be told about the Losers. No monster ever has put them into such astonishment, as this defenseless man.

"Wait, wait, can anyone explain what *on Earth* has just happened?" Richie demanded so loud, that it made the man laying at Madeline's side flinch nervously, not completely wakened up yet. The girl held her breath. His fingers squeezed gently, and he blinked several times,

gazing towards the light. His eyes were green. Robert gazed around languidly, with brows furrowed.

"Whe-" He wanted to continue, but his voice broke. "Where am I?" The man swallowed with difficulty and turned stiffly towards Richie. "Who... are... you?"

"Holy shit." Was the only thing Richie managed to whisper in a response.

Madeline gasped, not believing in what she's just heard. It felt as if her heart stopped beating. Her eyes waited longingly to meet his, and when they did, he gasped as well.

"You..." Robert whispered doubtfully, confusion written all over his face. "I remember... you."

A/N: *Boom.* This chapter was a *blast* to write. How many of you expected this? Because I certainly did not ;) It's not over yet. Yet.

16. Chapter 15

Chapter 15: Lost and Found

She was sitting on the Kissing Bridge, legs dandling over the metal barrier, hands on both her sides steadying her posture. Frost covered almost every inch of each bar, and a thin coat of white fluff covered even the smallest branches of nearby trees. Winter was especially beautiful this year, putting the whole town of Derry into a sleep free of all worries. Delicate threads of sunlight shone through the cloudy sky, making the snowdrifts sprinkle.

Of all seasons, Madeline always preferred winter, even if the cold caused her fingers to go numb and nearly white at the tips. It was soothing.

She saw the treads of her brown boots reflecting in the perfectly smooth surface of the frozen Kenduskeag river. Almost a year had passed, nine months exactly, and they were full of things completely new to her. Often very troubling, but also delightful things. What she was the most grateful for, was the Losers' help. There was nothing more comforting than to have someone on her side, when Lynn was almost losing her mind, seeing her daughter at the edge of physical exhaustion, dirty as a sewer rat. Not even mentioning that they were the one's to talk to the police while she was being transported to a hospital, and prove their fake explanation, as to her disappearance and wounds, genuine. She was captured and tortured by the oh so feared town's murderer, but can't remember much because of the drugs that'd been forced into her. She was abandoned in the Neibolt House with an intention of bleeding out to death, but then miraculously found by the group, along with a man, who's been put into amnesia — another sadistic experiment of the criminal.

Cliche, but believable enough to convince both the police officer, and the girl's mother, who of course had a whole lot of other questions, that had to remain unanswered, for her own good. And as to the second so said 'victim', his case was... problematic to say the least. Surely the same would go to anyone, who couldn't even remember their name, but as if his identity wasn't mysterious enough, he

insisted on following Madeline everywhere as soon as he managed to stand on his own.

The Losers could've killed him straight away, could've left him underground and forced the girl to believe that it's just the demon's another trick, but they did not. Furthermore, they'd trusted her even though she didn't want to reveal much of her and It's past. Well, after what the girl's done for Bill, trust was indeed what she deserved. And after they went away, Madeline was spending her time grounded to a hospital bed, assisted by her mother, who visited her at least twice a day, while Robert was at Mike's, trying to get used to his new situation. She didn't know what was going on inside of his head and how was he in general (alone with Mike!), and it was driving her insane. Apparently her feelings were mutual, because when she arrived to visit Mike as soon as it was possible, the librarian welcomed her with; "Oh thank God you're finally here Madeline 'cause I can't cope with this any longer. He only talks of you! *Where is that girl? Have you heard from her? Is she OK?*" Though his tone was pretentious, and the girl was aware the man'd been fighting the urge to violently wipe that blameless expression from Robert's face for all he'd done in the past, but restrained and did not spill only for her sake, it warmed her very heart.

Yes, she remembered that moment clearly, when she walked into the small living room and...

...and saw him sitting on the couch, bent over a newspaper, which his sharp green eyes scanned intently. Such a casual gesture, and yet so oddly unnatural for him.

"Yeah, I believe I owe you two some privacy." Said Mike though he didn't think that at all. "Just tell me if you need anything, I'll be in the kitchen."

"I sure will. Thank you, Mike. I am 'truly' grateful for what you've done for me. All of you."

"The nightmare is over, and that's all that matters." He added quietly. "It is also thanks to you. It's gone. Time to move on."

And Madeline did move on, further into the room, making herself known. Robert gazed up, and that assured her she'll never get rid of that weird tingling inside, each time his eyes were to meet hers. But he felt so... normal. It did not suit him at all. It did not suit the way his pupils detailed, while looking at her. Like if he's just found a missing piece of a puzzle, which he still wasn't able to put together properly.

"It's *you*." He brightened up a bit, and suddenly looked less miserable. She swallowed back the stress, and came shyly to seat beside him. Her redeemed companion's mind was an unknown area to her. She hated that. Did she really have to start over the entire relationship? If only she could pour her memories into him the same way they'd left his body... But it just couldn't be that easy. Nothing was ever easy when it came to these two, and though *now* it should be simple, it was just the opposite. "Please, tell me your name."

"But... You know it already." His voice was soft, but also deep and carrying that hint of wicked familiarity, and she was at the edge of breaking up right then and there.

"I do. But I just want to hear you say it. To make sure I remember it." How could she say 'no' to that?

"Madeline."

"Madeline." He repeated slow and clear. Her heart froze when his tongue rolled at the last syllable, distinguishing it.

He's still there. You just have to find him.

There was a moment of silence between them. She admired the way his lips tightened when he was thinking intensively. The newspaper was now sprawled on the coffee table. It was one of the older ones, the title said; "You'll laugh, you'll cry! You'll cheer, you'll die! Derry's annual festival ends with a horrible murder." What a stupid name for the front page's article.

"I don't like him." Robert spoke suddenly. "I don't trust him. Mike, I mean. Or his friends. I don't know why, but I just... I know that the official version of what happened to us isn't true. Madeline... Who am

I?" He was so confused, so lost, so human.

What should she tell him? What topics is it best to avoid? Madeline suddenly felt so small and weak under the weight of all these questions.

I know he'd prefer the truth, and he'll get it. But in time. I should let it all unfold before him slowly, because the whole story might be too much for him to handle.

"Your name is Robert Gray. I'm sorry to say that, but though Derry is your home, you have no relatives here. I don't know your age, or profession, or any of the *practical* information to be honest, but I do know you like to dance." Her voice softened at the few last words.

"Dance?" He asked, amused. Well, it was more of a sad amusement of a person who's already lost all hope, but it was there.

"Ym-hm" She nodded. "You enjoy late night walks. And amusement parks. Especially the scary rides. You're also a collector of beautiful, old-fashioned things. You can be quite impulsive, and have problems controlling your temper, so it's better not to bother you when you're hungry. But I don't mind." She smiled just slightly with gaze pinned to her fingers which she fidgeted with nervously, and didn't even notice he was gazing at her. "And as to Mike and the rest... Well, you haven't exactly been in good terms recently."

"And what do you have to do with all this? Who are *you*?" They locked stares again, and Madeline bit her lip with worry. *That* was the topic she wanted to avoid. "Why are you so important to me?" Robert added almost inaudibly.

"Well, I... You..." The girl sighed, disappointed with herself. She couldn't think of an answer reasonable enough. "I won't lie to you, this is a conflicting topic for me. I know it's unfair, but I need time."

She couldn't have known how chaotic and urging were his thoughts. She couldn't have felt how it was to have her mind ripped in half and function as incomplete. Or how much he wanted to just clench to her and never let go.

"OK." Said Robert, resigned.

"Thanks." It wasn't the best move from her, yet she couldn't help it, but be relieved. "Besides, we've got many other problems to take care of. You can't stay at Mike's forever, I'm afraid." 'And the sewers aren't an option no more.'

"Guess you're right. We've had enough of each other. I think... I think I'll rent something?" It sounded so alien, said by him. "As soon as I'll have the money to afford it."

If not the weight of this situation, Madeline'd burst into laughter. Pennywise — the murderous entity — having a job, and paying taxes like a normal person. He *was* a normal person! Unbelievable.

"I think I know just the right job for you." She said with the faintest smirk on her lips.

"You do, don't you?" He smiled as well. "Oh, and about my age... I was just wondering. Would twenty-seven be alright?" The funniest thing was that he had no idea why he chose this number.

"It would be perfect." Yes, it was.

"Lost in thought again, huh?" She indeed was, and when his voice brought her back to reality, she had to hold onto the barrier tighter, not to collapse.

"I'm sorry, did you say anything?" Madeline gazed down, a bit embarrassed. Robert was standing below her on the glassy ice, with his usual teasing smirk exposed boldly.

"Been for the past two minutes, but thanks for noticing."

"What are you even doing down there?"

"Trying to get your attention? Obviously?" His words marked the cold air with a subtle, misty trail. The girl giggled.

"You know that's not what I mean, I thought you were just gonna get my gloves."

"I did." Robert reached to the pocket of his black overcoat, and pulled out a pair of fluffy, woolen gloves. "But I don't know. Guess I'm going to keep 'em since you're not interested." He said, shoving them back to his pocket.

"Hey! I am! My hands are freezing."

"Then come, and get them." Those huge, green eyes narrowed at her daringly.

"Oh, no way!" He just loved to pull tricks like this on her, and Madeline'd never admit it, but she kind of liked it too. "Hasn't anyone told you, you shouldn't be treading on thin ice?"

"No." Well, that might've actually been true.

"Aw, come on. Come back up."

"Oh no no, I really think *you* should come back *down*." Robert said, making a few long steps towards her. There wasn't a game he's played to give up and lose. "What would happen if I made you, I wonder."

"Oh yeah? And how are you going to achieve that?" She was just asking for it.

"For example... Like... This!" He outstretched his arm to grip her ankle, and though the pull was just pretend, she let out a short, high-pitched scream. Robert wasn't aware what it meant for her. That he's done it all before, but driven with very much different intentions. He momentarily let go and just laughed at her.

"Ah, you're such a jerk!" She exclaimed, irritated, but the angsty feeling disappeared quickly. "OK, OK, alright! I'm coming." She said, swinging her legs to the other side and making it down the bridge to make it through the bushes and stand at the edge of the frozen river.

Yes, their relationship has definitely developed throughout these impossibly long nine months. A random observer would probably call it a friendship, but it's really grown beyond that, and none of them knew how to define it yet. They didn't feel the need to. Although he tried to be careful. Inseparable duo as they were, Robert knew she

was still immature (though often he could be just a mental child himself) and watched to keep their connection as it was, not pushing it forwards. Madeline probably couldn't even imagine how much he struggled with it. Especially when he saw her in that pretty, red coat, cheeks and nose ruddy from the cold, a few snowflakes on her eyelashes.

"You really want to drown us, don't you." She mumbled, making a cautious step, entering that temporary rink. He just waved the gloves before her encouragingly, standing in the middle of the frozen stream, and watched her move towards him trying her hardest not to slip.

"Happy?" She asked, finally standing in front of him. The right corner of his mouth curled. The top of her head was barely at the level of his shoulders. "Can I get them now?"

"First, you gotta tell me why you like this bridge so much." Robert gave her one of his most gorgeous sly smiles, and her lips quirked.

Ohh, so that's what this is about. That was exactly his way of getting information, which Madeline was still a bit anxious to give away.

"I don't know what you're talking about, it's just a nice place."

"Well, then you can say 'goodbye' to your gloves." He made a move as if he was throwing them away, and the girl reached for them instinctively, and at that moment the girl lost her balance. Her shoes whisked on the glassy surface, and she could almost feel the ice breaking under the pressure of her fall, but just in time, Robert caught her by the wrist.

"Damn, your hands really are cold." He admitted, and before she could do anything, wrapped her palms in his. Whatever Madeline was going to say got suddenly stuck in her throat, and she gazed furtively at their hands. It did make her feel warm inside.

"Don't ever do that again, please." She tried to mold her voice to sound firm, but failed.

"OK, I won't, if you just tell me. Why the Kissing Bridge?"

She sighed, defeated. She should've told him earlier anyway. Besides, his long fingers entwined with hers were just so distracting! Sometimes it was still hard to believe he was completely, utterly human. Or maybe 'she' just didn't want to believe in that.

"This is where we met." Gosh, it shouldn't sound so intimate. "I was actually sitting up there, and you showed up just where we stand, only it was early spring, so..." Her gaze went down at the ice below them.

"Oh." Well, he certainly wasn't expecting that. The man saw her cheeks flush, and thought that might've been a delicate topic indeed, but it was good to know, even though he still had so much to ask about. "Wait, so I was standing in the river?"

"Ym-hm."

"Why would I do that?"

"You tell me." She smirked. "I have no idea." He was silent for a while, trying to let it all set in his head.

"Thank you." His hands squeezed hers once more before letting go. "Alright, I think we should get going now. Otherwise your mum is gonna get mad at me again for keeping you out so long."

"You know she adores you. I'm sure you'll be forgiven just as soon as the last time." Said Madeline amused, but already headed after him.

"I'd call that pity, not adoration."

And on they went, careless, and just genuinely 'happy', forgetting that there were times much darker, even after his so said 'amnesia'. That there were nights long and full of emptiness, when nothing seemed to be right, just like...

...like that one night she dreamt of The Turtle. Maturin appeared in her dreams quite often during the first months, but that one night was different, because 'that' night, she stayed at Robert's. And where was that? Even though she definitely could've seen this coming, still finding out about Robert's interest in the haunted house on Neibolt

Street was worrisome. But he bought it anyway, taking up every part-time job he could, and considering the fact that the house stood there unwanted and in miserable condition (probably for ages), the price was next to nothing. So the man allocated most of his time and money to renovating it, and Madeline became a devoted helper. The activity was useful actually, because, to Madeline's delight, throughout spring and summer he worked in nearby town's amusement park, as an actor for the scary rides. The girl hoped for a scary clown, but he usually appeared as a skeleton, due to how tall and lean he was. And the dreadful house was just a perfect place to practice the required skills. It was after just a couple attempts at scaring Madeline, when he discovered his pure talent. Even as human, Robert could be pretty much terrifying, and the clients loved it.

When the summer season ended, and he got more days off, him and the girl spent most of their evenings on doing such things as painting the walls or reconditioning the old furniture, and that day the atmosphere was so pleasant neither of them noticed that the sun had set hours ago, and a full moon took its place. Madeline knew Lynn was taking a night shift that day, so no one'd be at home anyway, and he let her stay. When the lights went out, the visions began.

She saw Maturin's figure, floating somewhere there in between time and space. Only this time she wasn't there with the turtle, she wasn't fighting, but observing from the distance. The scene was a flashback.

The silent plea still hung in the air. It's plea.

Would this kill him?; she asked, drawn away from It's presence, and put into a place where she was herself again, alone with Maturin.

No. It cannot be killed, physically nor mentally. The power however, it can be taken away from the being. Something in his voice was just so comforting, and good... Eternal peace and knowledge surrounded the creature like a vivid scent.

Can you do this?

Of course, I can.

Then... Why haven't you done it before? So many lives could've been saved.

Well, he's never asked me before. Besides, he underestimates me greatly. I thought one day his own madness would finish him off, but it seems it only made him more fierce. And now, he wants to give up what he is for you, human girl. How could I turn down such a desperate appeal?

So what is going to happen to him? There must be consequences.

His soul will be ripped in half, and only a piece of him will remain. He'll forget all about himself, though some human memories may be kept. The eternal thirst and all his powers will be gone. As to the physical form... You know very well what shape he'll take.

Thank you.

Don't thank me, girl. It's you, who should be thanked. You have awoken the good in him.

And then it was all gone. Her eyes snapped open to see the blank ceiling, still cracked in certain places. Only flickering embers were left among the ashes of the fireplace, smell of fresh paint filled the room. Madeline fidgeted nervously on the temporary bed, consisting only of a mattress and bare frame. Laying on her side, she saw Robert's eyes were also open. The man didn't look at her though, but up into nothingness.

"You mumble in your sleep." He said, voice husky.

Her lips pressed in a tight line.

"What did I say?"

"Thank you." She saw his features harden in the corner of her eye.

"Oh."

There was something else he wanted to tell her, she knew it. And a long while had to pass before he did.

"You know, I... I remember kissing you at some point. Is that weird?"

Madeline's throat suddenly went dry. Her silence was just the answer he expected to get.

"I have those visions sometimes. But they're just images. Madeline, I don't know what I did, but if I harmed you in any way..." She tried to keep her emotions tamed and mouth shut, while his voice broke. "I'm not that person anymore. I-I mean I don't feel like I am. What I want to say is-"

"Robert." With one word she put his manifest of confusion and mixed feelings to a stop. Maybe it was the acceptance in her tone.

"What?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to." And that was enough.

"Good day, Mrs Glave!" Said Robert, through the opened front door, holding them for Madeline.

"Hi mum!" They walked in along with the freshness of chilly, December wind, and snow melting on their shoes.

"Hi, Madeline! Rob, you're just in time for dinner." They heard Lynn greet them from the kitchen, and in one moment the delicious scent hit their nostrils.

"Well, then it's just the perfect time." He said with a smile creeping onto his lips. Unfortunately (or rather fortunately), while removing his overcoat, he pulled too hard, and two loose buttons came off, landing on the carpet.

"Ah, dang it! He flounced. "Have you got anything I could sew these on with?"

"Uh..." Madeline put her red coat at the hanger.

"Would you help me with dishing out, dear?"

"Coming!" She answered her mother first. "Yeah, you'll find a sewing kit in one of my drawers."

"OK, I'll be back in a minute."

But a minute has passed, and he wasn't back. Two minutes even. Madeline knew she was totally overthinking it, and there wasn't anything odd going on there, but she just... had to check up on him. And when she did, the girl quickly realized she was *not* overthinking.

Robert stood there perfectly still, slightly bent over an opened drawer. The coat laid abandoned at his feet, the man's mouth were opened just slightly.

"Robert?" She asked, puzzled, and watched his eyes raise languidly to meet hers. They carried within something new, something solemn, but intimate. Knowledge. Realization. Astonishment. All of these and many more.

Then it occurred to her, that what he was holding was not a thread, but a string. A single, white string. The string she kept inside that damned drawer since the day he gave it to her.

A true storm of memories swirled through his mind. A popped balloon, a carousel among the dark, red neon, a golden pin, a kiss, an empty classroom, shattered mirror, a gun, a pool of blood, a music box... Each beautiful moment followed by an equally traumatizing event, and it all filled in his head, his lungs, his veins. But what was the cause, who was the antagonist? The villain?

And then it all clicked, every taste, scent and sensation from the past put in its rightful place. He experienced it again; the hot, red liquid dripping down his palm, and golden light reflecting on his face, and the curiosity in her eyes...

Robert Gray knew who he was.

He also knew who was the girl in front of him, and before he knew it, she was squeezed in his embrace. He made sure to feel her beating heart, and unsteady breath, and the gasp of surprise when she realized what just happened. And it was all new, but so familiar. Robert was like a dead man brought back to life.

"I don't feel the hunger." He whispered to her hair, still disbelieving

his own words.

"I know." Came Madeline's weak answer.

"I can't turn anymore."

"I know." A couple salty drops fell silently onto his shirt, but they were no tears of grief. He moved back slightly, only to have a look at her. When the girl raised her eyes to meet his, she saw the difference straight away. Same, old wicked glance was hiding behind the green ocean of his irises, and his features became somewhat sharper, unlike before. And God, did she love it.

"I missed you, little one." Robert murmured, and a full on smile extended her lips. "Such a clever girl. You got me wrapped around your little finger, and took care of everything, keeping up the act for so long... Seems like you're even better at pretending than I am."

Madeline was speechless. Not even in her boldest dreams did she imagine this moment would come so soon. That was still It speaking, but enclosed in a human body, given a human soul and needs.

"And I've been *awfully* well-behaved recently too. I've got to make it up to you." It might've seemed that the words referred only to the past months, but really it was so much more than that. Her scars still burned at times, and for nine months straight she had to wear shirts with modest necklines to cover up the biggest one before him, but maybe now there was no need to. It was so strange; to find comfort in bringing back if only just a part of his iniquity.

"Hm. Got any ideas?" If she was to be honest, making it up to her was just what she needed right now.

"I do." He really did, especially with her so close to him right now and in such a glorious moment. But some of the many warning signs were left running around his mind, repeating: *You shouldn't, you shouldn't, you shouldn't! You're a human now. Behave like one.* Oh, but who was he trying to fool? It was too late for restraining now. Way too late. Her reaction to his hand lifting her chin only reassured his thoughts. She knew what was coming, and a chill ran down her spine. Yes, that was it. No turning back now.

Kissing Robert Gray was not sweet and delicate, nor balanced in the slightest. It was rough and passionate, dominated by him completely, but this time she enjoyed it just as much as he did. Standing on the tips of her toes, though her legs went weak in the very first second, she let him lick the smile off her lips and mold it into something completely new, filled with need and longing, which he was willing to satiate with his own. These delightful seconds could've as well been hours, when there was no one and nothing left in the whole wide world, but them. He didn't expect that, but the taste of her was just as sweet to him as ever before. Unfortunately, the moment had to break sooner or later, otherwise they'd both lose their breaths. Madeline could barely focus, and had he not been holding her tight, she would need a moment to steady her pulse, but unexpectedly she was the one to speak up first.

"So..." Her voice was kind of hoarse, though she tried her hardest not to show it. "There's no chance you'd wear a clown costume sometime, is there?"

Robert chuckled, surprised to find out she wasn't joking at all. *She really is a miracle, this girl.*

"Any time you want, Madeline. Any time you want."

The End

A/N: Yup. This is it. We're officially done! I can't believe it ^^ As you can see I went for the happy ending, because, well I just couldn't bring myself to kill one of these two. (Or even any member of the Losers, which I am glad fit the story, because the book and its adaptation suck at this point ;P) I've actually grown to like them so much, I might do some extras in the future, like for example Madline and Robert's reunion with the Losers, so if you have any ideas or requests feel free to share them with me!

I've had a great time writing this fic (and a good couple of sleepless nights ;)) and I hope you had as much fun reading it. I would like to thank those, who have been here since the very beginning, and the ones, that caught up somewhere along the way. Thank you for your support! :3

17. Under Stars

A/N: Although the main story is finished, I'll be posting here a series of one-shots dedicated to Robert/IT and Madeline, referring to their future (and maybe past as well, who knows). And so here's the first one, bringing some happiness to these two just because they deserve it ;)

The following chapter was suggested by - yasdnilgoth

Under Stars

Flames weaved brightly before her eyes, climbing up towards the omnipresent darkness to split into tiny glints, and rest on the near-midnight sky as shiny, little stars. Outside, it was still cold even while sitting near the fire at the backyard of the old Well House, with two shirts on. When the yard's been cleansed of all kinds of weeds and ivy (and there were many), she asked him about making a campfire one evening straight away. That was yet another thing she liked to do as a child: watch the flames. It was hypnotizing and calming in a way, that made her feel safe, and she did really love the contrast between the beaming fire and the darkness all around. Warmth and cold — both pleasing, but mixed together, they were sending goosebumps dancing on her skin along with the lively light. Speaking of contrasts. The House itself was a great example of balance between the old and the new. It's been renovated, but the overall look and feeling about the place was exactly the same, however now familiar, and not disturbing anymore. It was almost finished; only the basement had yet to be taken care of, and a single room on the first floor which Robert kept locked for a reason unknown to Madeline. But she didn't mind. The girl let him have his oddities as long as they weren't destructive. 'If they weren't... Sometimes she wondered what was behind that door, and even the idea of breaking in has crossed her mind once or twice, but she just couldn't bring herself to do it.

Your curiosity will be the death of you one day, Maddie.

Sound of the door to the back porch being opened and closed drove

her away from her thoughts, and suddenly he was there, with a blanket swung over his forearm. She was still watching the flames, as he spread it on the ground, next to their provisional seat made out of a big log, but what caught her attention was that he did it awkwardly, with one hand. There was a glass in the other one, less than a half of it filled with liquid of color she couldn't define in this lighting.

"Hey, what's that?" Madeline asked, eyeing the glass suspiciously.

"That, um... A drink." Robert tried to keep a straight face and avoided her stare while settling down, careful not to spill any on his jumper.

"I can see that. And you haven't brought me one?"

"That would be inappropriate, wouldn't it, little one?" There it finally was; a smirk bent his lips slightly. He knew she wouldn't be necessarily happy about this, but patted the seat next to him invitingly anyway. The girl denied the offer with a frown.

"And drinking by yourself is? Besides, since when do you care what is appropriate and what isn't?"

"Since you still haven't reached twenty-one. And just because my intentions weren't always justified, doesn't mean I want to demoralize you."

She just had to crack a chuckle at that.

"*Demoralize.*" Madeline mimicked his sudden oh so practical tone. "So, you're playing the adult now, huh? I think you're just being an asshole." And yet, there was a half-smile on her face, while she sat down next to him, the log now serving as a backrest for the two.

"Maybe." He said, turning his voice so smooth, it made her forget the fire, and turn directly towards him. "Or maybe I just prefer you exactly the way you are..." Those flames reflected in the man's eyes, and just for a second she could've thought they were gleaming. "...with a bright, innocent mind." His hand went up to tuck behind her ear that one stubborn strand of hair that kept falling from her ponytail. "It is a treasure." She felt her cheeks starting to flush. Had

she waited with answering just a while more, it would be hard to think straight.

"Are you sweet-talking me just to make me forget I don't like the fact that you're drinking?" She asked with just a hint of cynicism, and it made him laugh.

The topic wasn't brought up again, he only took an occasional sip from time to time, while the conversation went on, heard only by the pitch-black sky. They had spent many days together, but now the atmosphere was somehow unique. Robert's never imagined that such a simple setting would ever bring him as much joy, but it did. Some time ago, he actually wouldn't have even thought that *anything* could bring him joy, other than slaughtering the innocent ones. But now he was able to feel another kind of joy... Pure, so somewhat alien to him, but pleasant in the most odd way possible. He was still getting used to it. Sometimes he thought his current state was nothing but a dream, but each morning he woke up (to his genuine surprise), later on seeing her again, and then everything was fine. Not that Robert didn't enjoy his old ways oh no, the acts at the ghost rides were an utter *delight* to him. That was one of the things that'd never change. Well, that... and...

At times his fingers would start tingling with violent anticipation, and he'd force them to straighten and clutch into a fist repeatedly in an attempt to ease out the feeling. His eyes would dart into multiple directions, searching God knows for what, and his heart would be taken by what could be described only as an electric shock, pumping the blood way too fast. These were the times when the man still felt the strange pull back to his primal behaviors.

Some say that a monster cannot be human, but everybody knows that a human can be a monster.

And he still could. But that's when she came in. Just a tap on the shoulder, or her hand crawling into his would suck the rage out of his body, and make his vision of the world around clear again. It was all since he'd found his memories, but did not happen too often though. It was there to come at the most unexpected moments, reminding him just how much he needed her to go on. The fact that most of the time she wasn't aware of that, only deepened the feeling. She was like

the roots of a tree, grounding him to common sense, steadying the mind. And it was evident especially now, when he had her back pressed against his chest as she was curled up in between his legs. He'd intended to keep her warm, or that's what he'd told her. In no time the lively brightness lighting up their faces started to dim, and slowly turned to a small pile of silently burning up embers, from which a shiny glint or two would be sent to the sky, then disappear. By the time their faces were already turned towards the stars, and stars only. Without the fire she'd started to shiver, and so she was now wearing Robert's jumper, not caring even if it was so big, it could fit not one, but *two* Madelines. Besides, its smell was soothing to her senses. Cotton candy.

The sky unfolded itself before them part by part, as she tried her best to describe some of the constellations to him. However, each time he objected, claiming that the display of the stars had nothing to do with the constellation's name, and so they ended up inventing their own. For example the Big Dipper ended up as the Big Balloon, and the girl was one hundred percent sure that's exactly how it should be called.

"You know, I always wondered how it would be up there. In space, I mean." She admitted quietly.

"But you have experienced it, haven't you?" Robert asked staring up as well, the darkened memories of that time lingering at the back of his mind.

"Well, yes, but it wasn't like I could take my time to enjoy the view, really. It was more... spiritual, than physical experience. Plus, I hardly knew what was going on."

"Hm." That was true. What she went through then must've been awful. "Guess you're right. For a human, it must be odd in the least." Her head turned up to look at him, biting her lower lip to keep in the question she's wanted to ask for quite some time to. It got out anyway.

"But not for you. How would *you* describe it? Is it where you come from?" He wanted to suppress the answer as well, to say that he won't discuss his past, but a part of him wanted to open up to someone. And in her eyes there were again those little sparkles of fascination.

Just how could he not let them burn?

"Yes. It is. Although now I'd probably see it as you did, what it meant to me before was power. Untamed and alive, and deadly enough to drive a mortal mind insane just by being in the presence of it." As Robert talked, his fingers came from behind to caress her jawline deliberately. There was a hint of the old harshness in his voice, and her heart quivered. "Where I could be infinite. But it was still a curse, unbearable nonetheless."

"I can't even imagine." Madeline mused, lost in thought. "So the universe really is infinite? Is there really nothing to hold it together?"

"Of course, there is." He remarked, a bit bemused by how little did humans know about the world. "Your Earth is just one of many universes, that exist."

"W-what?"

"It's true. They subsist as parallels, or even worlds completely distinct, inhabited by creatures different from any of those known to you. This world is not the only one I've been living in."

Well, that was a shock for Madeline. Maybe it shouldn't have surprised her, considering how much she's already witnessed, but to hear a clear confirmation to a thing so extraordinary was truly overwhelming. She wanted to move away to have a look at him, and see that he was being true, but he wouldn't let her. The man's arms coiled around her waist, holding her tightly in place. "No, no, stay just where you are."

"But-"

"Unless you don't want me to continue?"

"I do, but..." His tone brooked no opposition, and so did his grip, and she let out a deep, defeated sigh.

"Good girl." He was so pleased with himself, the good girl just had to elbow him in an act of defiance. "Ouch!" Robert laughed. "So, where was I? Ah yes, before I came to Earth there was another place. A place, which is now almost completely ruined and desolated. My stay

there was quite fortunate, my performances were the main attraction in the local theme park." Madeline's brows slightly furrowed. Was that really possible? She didn't want to interrupt him, though. "That is, until it all turned to dust. War is typical not only when it comes to your kind. And there are many dark, powerful beings with the thirst for power. Many are much stronger than me, but there are other shape shifting creatures as well; monsters as you'd call them. While some are just as nightmarish as one could imagine, others turn to the object of your longings and desires. To dreams."

"Dreams?" She asked, dazed by his words.

"Yes. To lure in their prey the more effectively. They consider sentimentality as weakness, and so they use it to their advantage."

That was the cruelest of tactics the girl could imagine. What would that kind of monster show to her, she wondered.

"And what about the Turtle? What is he?"

"Maturin? That ancient fool?" Robert's tone gave off clearly the aversion towards the entity.

"So you're still against him? Why? He *helped* you. And I clearly wouldn't think of him as foolish." Madeline spoke in Maturin's defense. A short scoff escaped the man's mouth.

"That he was of use once, doesn't mean I'll change my opinion of him." But a while after he heard how ignorant the words sounded, it was obvious he should've thought twice before making that statement. "But you do have a point. Although, there's nothing really interesting about him. Maturin's one of the so said 'good' ones, and a sworn enemy of mine. Born billions of years ago, and all he does is sleep."

"Aand cure ungrateful entities, such as yourself." She added, trying again to prove the Turtle's worthiness, with hardly any effect.

"Yeah, I bet he'll choke up on a galaxy or two one day."

She just rolled her eyes, and her stare went back to the stars above them. Now that Madeline knew, that while she sat there in his weird embrace, there were many wondrous things hidden behind the skies,

it saddened her.

"Rob, don't you... miss it? I mean..." It was hard to find the right words. "There's the whole wide world out there. Your world. And you can't be a part of it anymore. You can't even see it." *And it's because of me.* She spoke with guilt in her voice, hoping he wouldn't notice.

"Oh I *can* see it. I see it clearly right now, little one." Replied Robert so smoothly, it made her twist her head and look up, thinking how the hell would he be able to do that, and then she froze.

He wasn't looking up, but down. At her.

The realization set Madeline's heart aflame. She didn't really know what to say. Just the subtle movement of her lips on his expressed how she felt. Though his hands never left her waist, he didn't stop her, when the girl changed her position to sit astride him, in fact, nothing could make him more pleased. Her kisses were different from anything he's ever experienced, for no one has ever been so gentle with him. Oh, if she'd only knew what cravings it awoke in him...

"Why do you keep calling me that?" She asked, when the kiss broke. "Am I really that little?"

"Out of sentiment." Was his answer. Being able to see the man's expression again awoke a strange feeling in Madeline. It was always so... equivocal. For a second his teeth flashed white in a wide smile, and those green eyes melted into hers, filled with adoration, while his hands slid lower, pulling her even closer. "It is a paradox, you know." Robert's tone became a whisper, when his lips inched to her neck. "That someone's whole world can be enclosed in one person."

And when in between his kisses he didn't abstain to bite, the stars still shone, sparkling like jewels.

A/N: Those, who know about the little easter egg in the Dark Tower movie will get where I got the Pennywise theme park idea from. Just saying ;)

18. Red Neon

A/N: Another one-shot for you guys, I hope you enjoy!

chapter idea - yasdnilgoth

also for - **Wolflover235** - who wanted more Pennywise ;)

Red Neon

"You know, I thought they'd cancel the whole thing this year." Said Amanda, stuffing her mouth with popcorn. The smell of it enveloped the girls almost like a sweet perfume; vanilla and bubblegum. The sky was crystal clear, the afternoon sun hung high above Derry, and the park in the town's center.

"Yeah, me too. I actually thought I'll never come back to this place. Especially not at this time." Madeline's eyes glided from one tent to another and along the colorful decorations hanging in between the trees at both sides of the thin walkway. Sometimes it could be hard to keep your thoughts collected there because of the townsfolk and all these unbelievably excited kids wanting to catch up to every single one of the festival's attractions. Among the crowd, was probably not the place Madeline'd like to find herself in, but though her words were referring to the not so pleasant aspect of her past, her tone was lighthearted, happy. It's been years since she had someone to enjoy the celebration with.

"And yet, here we are, enjoying ourselves on a sunny day, as if nothing ever happened. No one remembers. No one cares. Isn't that weird?" She wasn't really concerned either, thought most of the time she was worrying practically about everything. If it wasn't about school, then it was about her older sister, or about her chores, or the next day, and quite often about Madeline herself, but Madeline's already got used to it, for she and Amanda became friends a good couple months ago. Her hair was tied up in the usual, perfectly neat ponytail, and Madeline admired her freckles, as the girl's head was turned towards the sun, eyes closed. She always wanted to have

freckles, while no matter what she did, her complexion remained pale, as if untouched by the sun. There was hardly a thing the girls had in common, as could be easily stated, even while looking at their appearances. Amanda was tall, and preferred modest, but pretty clothes, as the tightly fit green dress and black headband she was wearing now, sitting completely straight. Like a young lady. At the same time Madeline just couldn't stand anything that'd confine her movement or breathing, and usually went for oversized t-shirts and sweaters with skinny jeans and (occasionally) skirts. With her legs curled up on the bench, she looked inapt in comparison to her friend. Or maybe it was the other way around, but that wasn't important at all. For the first few weeks of their fellowship the Ripsom girl felt sorry, if not slightly ashamed, knowing that she could've reached for Madeline way sooner, but just didn't have the courage to do it. But now it was easier, since after the whole fuss about the girl being rescued from the dreadful (not so dreadful anymore) house, after the murderer'd kidnapped her, their peer's opinion of her changed dramatically. Although some still kept their distance, everyone was suddenly filled with empathy, and instead of listening to the ever lasting gossips, and making up new ones, the whole bullying thing stopped. The hateful classmates were now offering their help and even company, but Madeline wasn't taking it. She didn't need it. Just because you feel bad for what you've been doing and what you've believed, now wanting to prove that you're better than that, doesn't mean you'll be a genuine friend. But Amanda was somehow different, she came up to her, and even if it was brief and most likely never to happen again, if the events had taken a different turn, that little moment was probably the reason Madeline opened up to the only freckled girl in the class.

"I guess it's not about caring, but... moving on. There's actually more people here now than ever." Said Madeline accurately enough, because just seconds after the words left her lips, three laughing kids ran by, almost ramming against the bench. Had the girl got the opportunity to take a closer look at the blond boy wearing a war bonnet of overly vivid colors, she would've recognized him. She saw him exactly a year ago, with a plastic gun in his small hand.

"Moving on, yeah, that's more like it. I don't know if it's for the best though, but a lot's changed. It's funny, 'cause I'm not sure what it is

exactly, but you can just feel it in the air. And in the people. It's like the town's been taken by a sudden flood of happiness. I don't get it. No one's ever said the murderer won't be back." That was yet another attribute Madeline approved of. Awareness. Her friend's mind always remained open, and just as cautious as during It's hunt. Sometimes even too cautious, but she had her reasons.

"He won't. I hope." *Someone, who never left can't technically 'be back.* "But let's don't bother with this now. We're at the festival, let's do something fun!" The girl jumped off the bench, taking Amanda by the hand. They were supposed to enjoy themselves, and this was supposed to be a wonderful day.

Hours later the girls were walking down the alley, eyes filled with joy, cheeks flushed from laughter. A big, fluffy teddy bear was dandling by its paw in the shorter one's grip. They've accomplished the impossible, winning it at one of the fun slots. Although it was probably because Mr. Allen was behind the counter, when they decided to fight for the prize, taking down nearly all of the targets. Good old Gary Allen, who spent almost his whole life working in theme parks all over the state, and showed up at the festival every year, was more than happy to give them the plush toy, though most of his customers weren't as lucky.

The festival's rush hour had passed quickly, and now the atmosphere cooled down a little, noisy children giving place to jolly passersby; usually small groups or couples. The sun was notably closer to the horizon now, and even a hint of redness began to form around it.

"No, but seriously now, I've been wanting to ask you for quite some time now." Said Amanda, fighting to stop a smirk from bending the corner of her lips. There were only the remains of matte lipstick covering them. "What about that guy?"

"What guy?" Madeline was also struggling to suppress her own smile. She'd expected having this conversation sooner or later.

"Oh, come on. *The* guy? The one that picks you up after class? The one that magically appeared out of nowhere like a year ago?"

"Robert?" True, it's become a habit of his, after the day of the

miraculous return of his memories, to pick her up after school, which caused a lot, a *lot*, of curious stares. And just as she was feeling slightly uncomfortable each time, the man seemed to be pleased. She might have not got it even by now, but he liked the idea, that everybody knew she was going with him.

"Yeah, him. Are you guys dating?"

The question actually made the girl stop for a moment, with brows furrowed, suddenly rethinking it all.

Were they? Could what they had really be called 'dating'? She wasn't sure. That word just sounded so unfitting in her mind. So usual, and... normal. What they had was not normal. Though it *was* way more 'normal' now, but still...

"I mean, it's totally fine if you want to deny it, but that will only make it the more obvious." Amanda gave her a provocative, toothy smile.

"We're... Ugh, I don't know. We're just together, it's- "She wanted to sound cool and at ease, but her burning cheeks made that just impossible. "-it's not like he's asked me to be his girlfriend, or whatever. We just... are. If that makes any sense." The girl almost cringed at the word 'girlfriend'.

"Well, you definitely are *close*. Though there's not much I know about him, despite the obvious. Also, how old is he? Cause he looks much older than us."

"He is, but I don't really see it this way." *He was an entity when I met him, you probably wouldn't understand.*

"I didn't really expect him to stay in Derry though. He doesn't have anyone here, does he?"

"Yeah, he's always been a loner I guess."

"But come on, living all alone in that haunted house? Has he really lost his memory?... " The whole ton of questions spilling from Amanda's mouth made Maddie giggle.

"Hey, slow it down Mandy. You know, I wanted to keep it from you 'til the last moment, but I guess I'll just tell you. We're doing a party in a couple days. For my eighteenth birthday." A shy smile made its way to her lips. "And also to celebrate finishing the house renovation. A group of our mutual friends is coming, and you're invited as well, of course, so, you can ask him yourself. That is, if you want to come."

"Oh wow, Maddie that's great!" The girl was delighted. "Of course I want to come! Dang, I wish you'd told me earlier. Now I'll have less time to think of a present, and pick an outfit, and-"

"You don't have to get me anything, really."

"Sure I do, silly." The joy in Amanda's eyes was sparkling and alive, but suddenly a shadow of doubt fell on them. "But I don't know if my parents'll let me."

She was suddenly confused and unsure, her eyebrows furrowing, lips pressing tightly together. Madeline knew what it meant, and quickly began to search for something to draw her attention from the current thoughts. The search didn't last long, for there stood the nightmarish salvation she needed, and at first, she too couldn't believe her eyes.

"Oh, there's no way." She spoke quietly, while her jaw nearly dropped.

"What?" Mandy gazed up.

There it was, effectively displayed ahead of them, the familiar sign gleaming with red neon. CRACK OF DOOM. One could think it was the same building in which the terrible crime was committed, but no. It was bigger, and just as distinctive among it all as a single splash of ink on a perfectly white sheet. Before the entrance extended a long line of excited teens and adults. The building looked dangerously unbalanced, creaking through the rotten walls. It was encircled with a fence of barbed wire just for show, and could easily appear in one of the mainstream horrors they screened at the Aladdin Movie Theater on Saturdays.

"We're going." It wasn't a question, but a statement. The wonderment in Madeline's features was untamed.

"Wait, what? No!" Her friend protested. "We're *not* going. Haven't you had enough of this kind of stuff? Scary houses? Crazy people? Don't you remember what happened here? Hey, are you even listening?"

But Madeline was already ahead of her, her legs carrying the girl towards the spooky attraction. The teddy bear jumping rhythmically about her thighs.

"Maddie!" Amanda tugged at her sleeve, when they stood at the end of the line. "Are you hypnotized or what?"

"Please, Mandy, we just have to go. It'll be fun!"

"Fun? What if something bad happens? What if..." She's never heard her friend so worried. Her voice was of a person who's been afraid their whole life. Always careful. Always wary. Her relatives really shouldn't have been feeding her with stories of her murdered aunt. Of what could happen to her if she doesn't follow the rules. Maddie placed a hand on her shoulder and looked her straight in the eye.

"I swear to you, that no harm will come to us. Whatever it is, that you're afraid of, you don't have to be. Not anymore. You can forget about it, and just enjoy yourself."

"How... how can you be so sure?" There was still confusion in her, but it was slowly letting go.

"I just *know*. And I know what danger means. There's nothing dangerous about festival attractions."

"But this one's scary."

"It's meant to be scary. But it's safe, and besides, haven't you ever wanted to be scared? Scared, but also excited in the most conflicting way? Come on, I'm sure you did. Everyone does." The words left her lips, leaving a sly smile.

Amanda bit her lip, a small voice at the back of her head still ordered her to refuse, but she already agreed.

"And you can hold Mr. Penny if you want." Madeline offered the plush toy to her friend.

"You called him Mr. Penny?" Mandy rose a brow at the teddy.

"Yup."

In about twenty minutes they made it to the end of the line, and now the girls awaited their turn. Madeline was feeling the strange tingling again. It made her feet tap in anticipation. Since when was she so fond of haunted houses? Oh, right. She wondered if what's been waiting for them inside was even half as scary as what she's faced in the past. As if in a response, a male scream could be heard through the closed, wooden doors, and for a second doubt flashed through her face, but the scream was followed by laughter, and she eased out immediately.

"Are you still sure about this?" Asked Amanda with Mr. Penny clutched to her chest. "Cause I've never been in a haunted house before."

Meanwhile, the two guys, that were ahead of them moments ago, left the building through the back door.

"Jesus, Aaron! I can't believe it! You whine like a baby!" The taller one said in between bursts of laughter.

"This was wild, man." Replied Aaron, still catching his breath.

"Uh-uh. We'll be fine." Although all of a sudden she didn't know if that was true. She had a bad feeling about this, but shushed it, knowing she was probably overthinking.

Their tickets have been checked, and in no time the entrance stood open before them, the corridor walls creaking invitingly. Amanda's gaze fell on the long shadows cast by the red lights arranged artfully, and at this moment she knew exactly what her friend was talking about. She walked in almost just as willingly as she would to a candy store.

It was just as Madeline remembered. The grey spray imitated dust, cobwebs were splayed in every corner, and the passages were long and hovering like a darkened maze. She supposed the ominous sounds were coming from the speakers hidden somewhere in the dull

colors around, but she couldn't see them.

"Wow, it really is spooky in here." Said Amanda, her face reflecting all shades of red. Her heart speeded up at its pace just slightly. "Now guide us, Mr. Penny." The girl ordered, and they both went further into the rusty corridor.

They expected terrifying sound effects and 'monsters' jumping at them from every direction straight away, but that's not what they got. It was oddly quiet, and the atmosphere seemed empty. Only their unsure steps echoed in the passageway. Maddie gazed around; her eyes darting from left to right in a haste. Not knowing what exactly was supposed to scare them built up an unpleasant kind of tension. The wait was excruciating, for the girls didn't know that this path was only to lead them towards the real attraction.

But suddenly a fearful shriek escaped Mandy's mouth. Something brushed against her feet. It alerted her friend immediately, and she spun around startled, to see... a rat. It was just a rat. The shriek turned to a nervous giggle.

"Pff, if that's all they got, I'm disappointed." Maddie snorted, but mere seconds after that, she heard an abrupt click from behind. And then they saw it. The door, hidden behind the messily hung drapery opened painfully slow, by itself. At first, there was only a rectangular, blue outline at its edges, which widened inch by inch with a crackle that almost hurt the two pairs of ears. It opened just enough to make the blue, cold light from inside mix with the red on their faces, creating a beautiful shade of purple.

The girls locked eyes excitedly and went in, thinking they were ready. Madeline decided it's better to leave the door open, just in case... Just in case. To their great surprise, the room was filled with all sorts of puppets and life-sized dolls. Displayed like at an exhibition, they were dressed as a huge circus troop; dancers, clowns, mimes, and all the other freaks one could possibly imagine. But instead of a smile, each face was wried with a crooked expression of pain or anger, their outstanding clothes torn, limbs twisted or broken off. The girls walked in, as if in a daze, followed by countless dreadful stares, and they parted ways, unfortunately.

"Wow, that's..." Whispered Madeline, eyes sliding from one porcelain face to another, stopping at a certain, feminine figure of the exact same height as hers. The doll was of a subtle frame, and her dead eyes were bright, peeking from in between the strands of dark hair. The girls mouth went agape. It was a huge marionette with two bloody lines crossing her cheeks.

"...bizarre." Finished Amanda, taking interest in one particular, white face across the room. He stood tall and broad, in just the most beautiful clown costume. Puffed sleeves, ruffed collar, and little silver jingle bells attached to it. Amanda's stare was glued to him, and furthermore, she wanted to come closer and take in all the little details of what she thought was just another mannequin. The girl observed the clown's odd features, having to draw her head back to see the top of that messy, red wig. He was beautiful, but daunting, and something was just off about his expression — one eye, to be more specific. As she was just a few steps away from him, she saw that one of the vividly blue eyeballs was directed far off to the right, like a walleye. Something about it mesmerized her, and seeing the crimson, bumpy nose, she didn't know why, but her hand went up and tapped against it.

An electric shock went through her every nerve, for the turned eye focused at her in a split-second, and a devilish smile bent his lips.

"Beep-beep, Mandy"

The next thing Madeline knew was that the room was filled with her friend's uncontrolled scream. There was a loud rustle to her right, and then she saw the terrified Amanda lunging towards the open door, followed by the oh so familiar clown. The utter confusion rooted her feet to the ground, and she watched him chase the girl with a throaty, high-pitched laugh that frightened her the more. She couldn't believe it. She could *not* believe it! But just before that tall, living nightmare she adored so vanished from her sight, his head turned to her if only for a moment, giving her a playful wink. The forgotten teddy bear was laying on the floor. She'd abandoned Mr. Penny, and got Pennywise instead.

Not ever in her life has her heart beat so fast. It pounded in her chest like a drum, her unsteady breath setting it at its rhythm. The peaceful

corridors seemed to be closing in and twisting around her, as she heard the heavy footsteps mixed with quiet jiggling behind her. *What are you doing? This is ridiculous, you're such a little wimp, Amanda! This is just an act!* The thought ran through her mind almost as fast as she was right now.

"Oh, Mandy, Mandy, Mandy why do ya run from me, isn't it what you came for?" The voice chasing after her growled.

Nope, nope, run! He's nuts!

And so she did, she really tried, but even the maze had to end at some point. Noticing the darkened backdoor and the shining 'EXIT' sign above it was like a cold shower streaming down her entire body. Just a couple paces separated the girl and the way out of this mess, but she stopped just before pressing the handle. Madeline. Where was Madeline? Amanda was waiting for the awful creature to crush her holding her breath and eyes shut, but nothing came. When she gazed back up, there was only red light, thick as smoke before her. She let out a sigh of relief.

"Maddie? Are you there? Maddie!" The girl called, taken over by genuine worry. Everything in her froze, as there was no response. Silence. Just silence. "Madeline!"

"I'm here!" There it was. Now Amanda could breathe freely. She saw her friend's outline getting near in the misty passageway, and was about to say something, but the words just got stuck in her throat. He was there. The clown. He was right behind her, and Madeline wasn't aware of that. Mandy's mouth hung open. Her jaw trembled.

Although the monstrous showman seemed perfectly calm, with a joyous smile on his red lips. Every inch of him was evil, including the finger that went to those lips to wordlessly order Mandy to keep whatever she wanted to say for herself. Just as the girl saw those huge gloved hands wrap around Maddie, the door behind her unlocked, and she was kicked outside, without the possibility to go back.

Madeline was dragged back roughly, one hand clasped around her wrists, forcing them behind her back, the other on her eyes, so she

couldn't see him.

"Well, hello there, little one. Are you lost?" Pennywise murmured. She'd be damned if he knew just how much she missed this psychedelic tone. It was so real! "It's dangerous to wander off to the unknown like that, you know." It wasn't just his job, it was *him*. Him putting his old skin back on, and at that exact moment she knew she'd encourage him to do so much more often. "But that's OK. I can guide you." Her wrists were freed, and she clutched to him. Although she could not see, at least she could feel. His free hand traced its way along the length of her torso with passion, that only could be provided by him, as the girl felt his mouth inching to her ear.

"Or maybe you want to find yourself in danger. Is that it?" She did not answer, but simply smiled. "Unfortunately, we don't have much time to explore the topic now. There are things I have to attend to, kids I have to scare..." It was hard to remain silent as the hand slid under her shirt. "But I'd rather take you. Only you. I wish I could." The whisper was the last thing she heard from him that day, because just then, he vanished into the mist illuminated with red neon, leaving her breathless, in front of the bright 'EXIT' sign.

BONUS:

"Oh my God, Madeline what the hell was that?! Are you OK? What did that freak do to you? Wait... why are you smiling?"

"It was him! It was Robert."

"WHAT?!"

"He's a performer. He's been working in theme parks before, but he didn't tell me he was going to be 'here' today, I'm sorry Mandy."

"Hold up! Are you trying to say that this creep here was your boyfriend?! I was scared to death!"